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Faye Lanell Olsen

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THINGS HOPED FOR

By

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B.A., University of Missouri-St. Louis, 1972

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

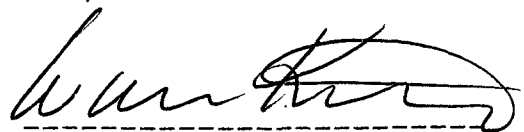
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THINGS HOPED FOR

A Collection of Stories

By Faye Lanell Olsen

Now faith is the substance of  
things hoped for, the evidence  
of things not seen.

Hebrews 11:1

THINGS HOPED FOR

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
THE RED DRESS.....	1
SNAKES IN THE BRUSH ARBOR.....	42
THE CHOKE COLLAR.....	68



THE RED DRESS

A black ambulance whizzes past our house and screeches to a halt in front of Gramma's. My brother Eddie and I race up the path. He gets there first because he's three years older and can run faster. The ambulance sits like a wind-up toy with lights whirring on top, side doors flopped open, and back doors swung back. Dust from the gravel road swirls up around the wheels. Two men take a weird looking bed from the ambulance and wrestle it across the cedar log bridge that Dad won't drive our car over because he says the supports are rotting. The bed has whirligig wheels that bog down in the gravel walkway to the house so the men pick it up and carry it the rest of the way.

Gramma is wrapped up in a white quilt and belted down on the bed when they come back out. All I can see of her is her face and hair. Dad always teases her about her Orphan Annie hairstyle. Says the only difference is that Gramma's is purpler than all get out. Gramma's head bobbles around as they bring the bed down the steps. Mom walks beside the

bed, her hand resting on its edge. She walks right past Eddie and me and is talking in her everything is going to be okay voice and doesn't see us.

They carry Gramma across the bridge and one of the men stumbles when his foot slips on the cedar logs. Gramma's eyes open wide like my cat Jeepers' when I tried to give him a bath even after Eddie told me cats didn't like water.

The men put Gramma in the back of the ambulance and Mom climbs in after her. They close the back doors, then jump in front. I stare after them as hard as I can, but all I can make out through the dust is the whirring light on top. The road is empty when the dust clears.

Aunt Lucille and Uncle Albert come out of the house next with Aunt Lucille, as usual, doing the talking.

"Now, Stanley," she is saying to Dad who has stopped in the doorway and is holding open the screen door, "Don't you go worrying about Helen. Albert and I will look after her and I'm sure we've made the right decision." She reaches down to tug her girdle into place. "After all, gangrene is nothing to fool around with and though Dr. Burrows is the best there is in these parts, well, you know yourself he's no match for Barnes Hospital."

Aunt Lucille is always saying that St. Louis where she and Uncle Albert live offers more than Cobalt Village. I think so too. I like Forest Park where the squirrels play tag around trees and run across the grass to snatch bread

crusts and peanuts we toss out. Here at home the squirrels stay up in the woods and hide in the higher limbs of the trees or hole up in a hollow one so they won't be shot.

"It's mighty reassuring, Lucille, to know that you and Albert will be with Helen. I just can't take off from work and of course there's Susan and Eddie to look after." Dad is leaning on the open screen door and I know Gramma would be giving me heck for doing that because she'd be worried about all the flies getting inside. "I'll keep in touch but you call me if anything happens. You know what I mean."

"I know, Stanley. We'll just hope for the best. Albert has always said his mother is too stubborn to let an illness get her down. Right honey?"

"Yep. Mom's a strong one alright." Uncle Albert reaches over to shake Dad's hand. "Thanks, Stanley. And we'll watch out that Helen don't wear herself down worrying over Mom. Bye now kids," he nods in our direction as he gets into the car.

He never does have much to say to us. When Eddie and I visit them in St. Louis, he stays home and watches TV while Aunt Lucille takes us places. Most times she takes us to the St. Louis Zoo and we go see all the different shows. My favorite is the cat show because the lions roar like they are real tough but still go ahead and jump through the fiery hoop when the trainer cracks the whip. He even puts his fist in their mouths. When I try that with Jeepers, he

bites me hard. He won't jump through the hoop and it isn't even on fire. It's just a rusty old wagon wheel I found in the trash heap up in the woods.

The monkey show is Eddie's favorite. The chimpanzees are dressed in bright silk shorts and jackets and they circle the stage on unicycles and swing on trapeze bars.

The elephant show is boring. The elephants look more like granite than the granite at Elephant Rock State Park looks like elephants. We watch it anyway so we can sit still and eat our snowcones.

Just walking around the zoo is fun, too. I've seen an ostrich bury its head in the sand. And once I let a giraffe that was reaching over the fence to nibble leaves off a tree, lick my hand. Its tongue was as rough as the pumice stone Aunt Lucille uses on her elbows. I like walking through the 1904 World's Fair birdcage, but I don't know about going in the snake house where the boa constrictors are kept. Sometimes I have nightmares afterwards about there being snakes that big crawling across our road at home. I stay way back away from the gorilla cages because people tease them and they get angry and take it out on everybody. They throw rotten bananas and apples at you and spit watermelon seeds. Once one even peed on someone. "Serves him right," Aunt Lucille said. "He shouldn't be teasing gorillas. Gorillas are more intelligent and sensitive than most people."

"Come give Auntie a kiss," Aunt Lucille says before she gets in the car with Uncle Albert to leave Gramma's house. She snuggles me up close to her silky smooth dress and I breath deep so I can smell her perfume. Mom and Gramma only feel and smell like this on Sundays. Aunt Lucille's freckles are covered with powder, but I can see tiny hairs on her cheeks because they glisten like sparks of light in new snow.

Eddie disappears behind the house before his turn.

After the car pulls away, we follow Dad inside. He picks up a dishtowel and begins to dry off Gramma's coffee cups with the pink rosebud design and places them in her hutch. The tick-tock of the grandfather clock in the dining room is the only sound until Dad clears his throat and slings the dishtowel over his shoulder.

"We've sent Gramma to the hospital. She really balked about leaving home, but Dr. Burrows thought it best. Gramma has a blood clot in her leg and he says it's caused something called gangrene. That's why she needs to be at a good hospital. The doctors there will know what to do about it. Mom will stay right with Gramma so she won't feel so all alone. And I'll be your cook while she's away," he added, jabbing a finger at my tummy, "and you'll be the lady of the house and will have to see after Eddie and me. Right, Edward?"

Eddie nods from where he stands in the doorway to Gramma's empty bedroom. He is trying to smile but his eyes are swimmy and his face looks lopsided like after he's been to the dentist.

The three of us walk down the path home. I hold Dad's hand tightly and watch for the tiny blue violets that are just beginning to break through last year's tough, dried out grass. Once in a while I see a violet or a purple fighting cock, but mostly just new spring grass and wild onion shoots. Eddie throws stones at the tall cedar trees that line the ditch between the gravel road and our dirt path. Those cedar trees have been there so long they've grown lots taller than our house and it has an upstairs.

Eddie and Dad get busy feeding the pigs and stuff so I just sit in the rubber tire swing under the walnut tree. It feels lonely already without Mom and Gramma. I wish we had a television set like Aunt Lucille and Uncle Albert.

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson come by after church and talk with Dad for awhile. Mr. Johnson was the one helped Dad put the gray asphalt siding on our house. Mom said they did a good job but she wished they hadn't cut it so crooked around the windows.

About suppertime their boy Lonnie shows up with a bowl of fried chicken gizzards and a pan of cornbread. I'd rather of had the hamburgers Dad had been fixing to fry.

Next morning when I come in for breakfast, Dad is just ready to pour some hot fudge onto a buttered plate to cool. Next he adds milk to the fudge pan and warms it for me to drink. I guess he wants to make us feel alright about Mom not being here because he usually wouldn't take time for things like this except on weekends. Before the fudge has a chance to harden, I scoop it onto some saltines for cracker fudge sandwiches. It's my week to pack our school lunches.

At noon recess Edward opens his lunch sack and unwraps his sandwich and boy is he mad! He was expecting bologna. After school he starts yelling some more and he uses some words he isn't supposed to say. He keeps it up the entire two miles home. Even follows me when I take the shortcut over the fence and through the mean bull's pasture and then down the railroad track.

"Well, you pharisee you, just fix your own lunches from now on!" I scream.

He can't yell back because we hear the train whistle and have to run like heck to beat it to the crossing. As we watch the train rumble by the black and white crossed timbers, I consider trying to catch Eddie with "Railroad crossing without any cars. Can you spell it without any r's?" but I'm pretty sure he has already heard it and he doesn't look in the mood for a joke anyway.

Mom has been in St. Louis for a couple of weeks now. I



wish I could be there with her so we could do fun things with Aunt Lucille and I could sit and work puzzles with Gramma. It must be awfully boring just staying in a hospital room all the time. Dad says not to worry, that Gramma will be home soon and will be tickled pink to have me be her nurse.

Dr. Burrows is to give the yearly vaccinations at school today. Eddie says he uses a big big needle for the smallpox shot and it stings much worse than the DPT shot I got last year. Eddie doesn't have to get a shot this year. I don't really believe him but my stomach does and I can't eat. When Dad comes in from milking, he says I look peaked.

"Do you feel alright, Pumpkin?"

Eddie pipes in that I'm just afraid of getting my shot so Dad sends me on to school anyway.

When Dr. Burrows gets there, the teacher has us all line up for our shots. Dr. Burrows opens his black bag on the teacher's desk and his nurse lays out tiny bottles and gauze and needles. Jimmy Pertile is in line in front of me. He's only a first grader and he starts to wail something pitiful when the nurse takes hold of him by his shoulders and guides him up to Dr. Burrows. Just as Dr. Burrows starts to put the needle in his arm, Jimmy rears back and kicks him good in the leg.

"Now young man, we'll have none of that," says Dr. Burrows as he rubs his shin and straightens his eyeglasses.

They give Jimmy his shot anyway and he goes on outside sniffing. I'm surprised when I get my shot because it isn't really with a needle at all but is like a miniature pincushion with lots of teeny straight pins that barely prick my arm. Outside I start down the staircase and suddenly the steps don't feel solid under me anymore. The next thing I know, I'm on the cold ground with Dr. Burrows bending over me holding some awful smelling stuff under my nose. I'm not really hurt and when Eddie tells him I didn't eat breakfast, Dr. Burrows says that was what made me react that way to the shot.

At afternoon recess when we turn the jump rope for hot peppers, Eddie and his sixth grade buddies chime--"We saw Susie's underpants. Nah-nah-nah-nah-naa-h-nah!!"

Eddie starts up again at home and tells me that's what I get for not eating my breakfast like I'm supposed to.

"Shut up! Shut up!" I scream, my body bent over from the waist, my arms drawn backwards with tight fists just aching to plow into his ugly face.

"Susan. Edward. Stop your bickering," Dad yells from the kitchen.

"But, but...Dad!"

"No back talk, young lady. Just go to your room until supper!"

Eddie sticks his thumbs in his ears and waggles his fingers at me as his tongue lolls out the corner of his

mouth and then he darts outside. I go to his room instead of mine and really light into his pillows. That makes me feel a little better.

Dad waits until we finish supper, then moves the dishes away from his place so he can lean forward as he rests his arms on the table.

"I talked with your mom today." he tells us.

"Guess Gramma's getting about fed up with that hospital food, huh?" Eddie chuckles.

I grin but Dad doesn't.

"Do you two know what the word amputate means?"

I shake my head.

"Well, sometimes if someone is hurt real bad then the hurt part has to be taken out to keep the rest of the body healthy. Remember when Mr. Johnson had that black and tan hound what got his leg caught in a beaver trap? Dang leg was so mangled Mr. Johnson had to go ahead and cut it off. Well, the sore on Gramma's leg is like that. It's gotten so infected that to keep the poison from being carried to the rest of Gramma's body, the doctors've had to amputate that leg."

Mr. Johnson's dog had looked pitiful hobbling around on three legs. Eddie and I made it a wooden peg just like the pirates, but he chewed off the tape we attached it with. What would Gramma look like? Did she scream when they cut

her leg off?

Eddie stares down at his plate and bites his lower lip like he does when he is being scolded.

"They're taking real good care of Gramma." Dad bends his legs behind him on either side of his chair and leans closer. "They don't want her to catch pneumonia because that could be the devil's worse for someone 80 years old. Your mom stays right there with Gramma. Gives her drinks when she wants and plumps up her pillow. Just like she does when you two're sick. Of course the nurses and doctors are in and out, checking on Gramma."

Eddie says he is missing "Sky King" and kicks over his chair in his rush to get to his room. He slams his door and turns the radio up as high as it can go.

Dad stands up quick, too, like he's going to go after Eddie. Instead he begins to scrape and stack the plates. He takes the scraps out to the back porch and empties them into the slopbucket to take to the hogs later. By the time the bucket is full, the slop looks purple and pink and yucky green because of the different leftovers put into it. That's why I don't like to carry food out to it. It stinks, too, and even Jeepers steers clear of it.

Dad carries the stacks of dishes into the kitchen and puts them into a dishpan. After squirting them good with Joy, he pours hot water from the teakettle over them to soak while he finishes clearing the table. I help put things in

the fridge.

Jeepers rubs against my leg so I wrap him in an old towel and sit in Mom's wicker rocker and snuggle my face down in his soft fur. Sometimes he runs away when I try to treat him like a baby, but this time he just closes his eyes and folds down his front paws over the blanket while I rock him. I don't want to think about Gramma having her leg cut off so I think back to before she got sick.

Gramma and I started a puzzle on the card table in her dining room. She weren't tall enough to reach the puzzles stored in the top of the armoire in her bedroom, so she pulled over a little three-step ladder which she had me steadying for her.

"Let's look at the pictures, too," I begged. Gramma handed down the red velvet photo album and then reached to the top of the stack for the puzzle of some people on a picnic.

I held my breath as Gramma's stockinged legs rose in a tiptoed position as she strained to reach the puzzle and didn't let it out until her heels clopped back into the blue houseshoes.

She lay the puzzle on the hooked rug she kept spread on top of Great-Grandmother Claredy's steamer trunk and then the two of us kicked off our shoes. Gramma plumped up the pillows on her bed and we settled down together on the wedding ring quilt and opened the clasp on the album.

On the first page was a picture of Grandad and Gramma when Gramma was young and had long black hair done up in a roll on top of her head. Gramma said in the summertime she washed her hair on Saturday mornings in a big kettle in the yard. Afterwards she stayed outside combing it until it dried in the sun. Her hair fell to beneath her waist so it took all morning to get it dry. I pictured her bent forward so that she could brush her hair up and over her head to dry the underneath part.

In the background of the picture was a tiny log farmhouse. They lived on the farm Grandad's daddy had bought when he left the family plantation in Alabama to be on his own. Gramma said the log house was the same one where Grandad's widowed mother had raised her five children after his daddy was killed fighting in the Alabama militia. Far across the field, she had told me, was the grove of pine trees where Great-Uncle Putnam was once lost.

"Tell me about it, Gramma." I heard the story many times but I like to watch Gramma's face as she tells it.

"He was only four at the time and had wandered off from the rest of the children as they trekked to the spring for water. The men of the neighborhood searched all night in the black oak woods, thrashing through thick undergrowth of sumac and wild blackberry brambles, but had only their tiredness to show for their pains. They were fixing to drag the stock pond when, just before noon, one of the men found

the boy asleep in a thicket. His eyes were big as silver dollars as he told about the big dogs that had circled around him, howling sadly."

Gramma made a long drawn out 'how-ow-ow-l' to show me how sad. I tried to do the same thing but mine didn't sound as good.

"He wasn't hurt by the wolves because God was looking after him just as He does all little children." Gramma's stories, even the ones she made up about me and Jeepers, ended like Sunday School stories.

I thought of the postcard the teacher had given our class the Sunday before. It had a picture of Jesus on the front and he was holding out his hands like a maypole while all the little children gathered around him. We sang "Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so."

"And who's this, Gramma?"

It was of a little girl about my age and she was wearing a kind of long dress with ruffled pants poking out at the bottom. She stood next to an empty chair and reached one hand out to rest it on the top of the chairback. A ribbon tied in a huge bow held back her hair. Her nose tilted up and her eyes looked at me so alive I felt she could talk to me if she wanted. She was Gramma's cousin and each time we opened the album to her picture, I would ask her name. I loved to hear Gramma say, "Emma Miranda Martha Kazar Faircloth." I never knew of anyone else that had such

a long name.

"Randi and I grew up together," Gramma related for the umpteenth time, "attended the same school and all, but I'm still here and she's been to Paris and Greece and even Tibet."

Gramma stared at the wall across from us like she was seeing all those places.

"Maybe you and I can go to Tibet?" I said.

"No, sweetheart." Gramma gave me a pat on my leg. "But you go for both of us and send me back a postcard."

"Did you ever wear ruffled pants like that, Gramma?" All I ever saw Gramma wear were heavy cotton stockings that she pulled all the way up past her knees and then rolled down over a pink elastic garter.

"Oh, my yes, and they were the very dickens to climb trees in!"

I giggled as I imagined Gramma climbing a tree.

I stayed overnight and we raced to see who could complete an outside edge on the puzzle first.

Both Eddie and I spend lots of evenings at Gramma's, playing checkers or dominoes or working puzzles. Gramma keeps a card table set up in the corner of the dining room just for this.

When the grandfather clock gongs 8:00 o'clock, we know it's time to quit playing so's Gramma can make ice cream fizzies. If it's cold out, she makes hot chocolate. It's



fun to sit at the red and white ice cream parlor chairs and table that came from a restaurant Grandad used to own.

At 9:00 o'clock, we take the big flashlight and race down the path home. Eddie always wins and that's why Gramma always gives the flashlight to me to carry.

Tuesday night Dad talked a long time in a low voice to Mom on the phone. "Don't let Lucille get under your skin now, Helen," I heard him say once. Mom and Aunt Lucille never quarrel actually, but Mom doesn't laugh with Auntie like I do. Once I heard Mom and Gramma talking about some other lady that Gramma had thought Uncle Albert would marry. She lived over in the next hollow and went to the same church as Gramma.

"Then here comes Albert back from Montana with Lucille. Claimed she was the rarest gem ever taken out of Butte's richest hill on earth."

"Humph! She's rare alright," Mom agreed. "She won't lift a finger to do any real work."

"If he had just married Margaret," Gramma sighed, "she'd of worked right alongside him on the old Shannon farm and he wouldn't be working for that brewery place either. Margaret wouldn't have stood for a husband helping to make the devil's brew. But he's a grown man, Helen. Nothing we can do now but pray for him to see the light."

I didn't like to listen to them talk that way. Auntie

was always nice to me. At canning time, while Mom and Gramma sweated it out in the hot kitchen, drinking black coffee and dipping fuzzy peaches in scalding water to loose the skins, Auntie would crawl with me under the quilt I had strung over two sawhorses. We'd sip Koolaid out of the teacups she had given me for my birthday and munch on ripe mulberries that we had picked together off the tree in the middle of the garden. Mulberries are shaped like blackberries only they grow on trees and don't have the tough seeds that blackberries have. They're sweeter too. Auntie boosted me up on her shoulders so I could reach the really ripe ones.

While we had tea, we talked about faraway places. Like India. Auntie said there they believed that when a person died, he might come back in another lifetime as an animal.

"If he was a pesky person, he might come back as a sweat bee and then get squeezed to death again right away by some person who doesn't take to sweat bees stinging them in the crooks of their elbow," she said as she did just that to a sweat bee. Auntie couldn't get used to Missouri's sweat bees and chiggers and seed ticks. "None of those beastly things in Montana," she'd say. "Just nice gentle creatures like grizzly bears and cougars."

"Maybe Jeepers is really an Indian prince," I conjectured as I held my teacup very ladylike by the handle as Aunt Lucille had shown me.

"I don't know about that," Auntie said. "But you certainly are a princess." She yanked at my braids and smiled. "Coming back to life is called reincarnation," she explained. "I really don't think people come back as animals, but I believe our spirits live eternally by existing in new bodies all the time. In some of my dreams, people are dressed in clothes from hundreds of years ago and we are living in a house that's like one of those castles along the Rhine River in Germany. We are all sitting around a big stone fireplace to stay warm and maids come in and out with things for us to eat and drink."

Aunt Lucille put her arms around me and gave me her Montana bear hug. "Maybe you and I'll come back as sisters someday."

"Yea, or maybe we were sisters already in that castle!" I tried to recall any dream I might have had about living in a castle.

When our Sunday school teacher told us about how all good Christians go to Heaven, I told her I wanted to be reincarnated instead so I could be Aunt Lucille's sister. I saw her talking to Mom after church and then Mom wrote a long letter to Aunt Lucille.

When Dad finished talking with Mom, he told Eddie and me that he would take us to see Gramma on Saturday.

"Is Gramma feeling better?" I asked.

"Your mom just thinks it best you two come see Gramma. Time for bed now. Tomorrow's a school day."

"Dad?"

"Yes Susan?"

"Do you think Aunt Lucille will take us to the zoo while we're there?"

Eddie scowled. Dad just shook his head. Why, I wondered, was it wrong for me to ask?

Thursday Miss Emma came to school on her monthly visit. She's from the Nazarene Church and comes to tell us stories from the Bible. Dad says she's eccentric and shouldn't be allowed to come to public schools. Mom says she's just a staunch believer in God who grew up deep in the Ozarks where there's only one right way to salvation and she's dedicated to bringing that message to children.

"What harm is there in telling bible stories?" Mom asks.

"No more than in telling fairy tales," Dad answers. "But I'm not so dang sure they do any good either."

Dad doesn't believe in God but he usually doesn't say anything against Mom teaching Eddie and me to believe. Mom tells Eddie and I that Dad is really an agnostic which just means that he needs more time to get to know God. He goes to church with us on special occasions like Easter and

Christmas.

I'm sitting at my desk, seeing how many Roman numerals I can squeeze into a line of notepaper, when I hear the chug-chuggle of Miss Emma's car. It's a brown Studebaker with a fish snout front and Miss Emma sits up very straight behind the wheel but still stretches her neck to peer over it. You can see her knuckles at the top of the wheel and, just behind them, her square shaped glasses and frizzy brown hair.

Eddie and his buddy, Lester, go out to help with the easel she uses for her flannel board.

Our school is just one big room with a whole bunch of wooden desks. The kids in the higher grades get the big double desks in the back of the room while the rest of us sit at single desks near the teacher.

Whenever Miss Emma comes, we are allowed to crowd together with some of us even sitting on desk tops so we can all see the paper figures of the baby Moses hidden in the bulrushes or of Zaccheus up in an olive tree. Miss Emma tells the story that goes with the paper cutouts as she moves them around on the flannel board. She forms little spit bubbles at the sides of her mouth as she really gets into the stories and she shifts her feet back and forth on her sturdy shoes as she shuffles the figures around. After she finishes the stories, we sing songs:

"This little light of mine,  
I'm going to let it shine.  
Hide it under a bushel, no!  
I'm going to let it shine."

We take turns reciting bible verses we have memorized. If you memorize enough of them, Miss Emma will give you a red pocketsized New Testament. My friend Becky Pertile said so many verses she got a Bible and is now doing worksheets so she can go to camp in July.

This time, before Miss Emma leaves, she has us all say a prayer together for Gramma. We hold hands in a big circle and sing "When We All Get To Heaven." It sounds like a happy song, but Miss Emma's eyes look at Eddie and me like Dad's had when he had to tell me that the old sow had laid over on the runt of the litter. He knew I was expecting to keep it as a pet.

Early Saturday morning Dad knocks on my door.

"Time to get up, Pumpkin. Breakfast is ready."

I pull the quilts tighter around my shoulders and jerk the pillow down to where it lines up with my chin until I remember why I have to get right up. Usually I wake up when Dad begins to stoke up the coal furnace in the dirt basement beneath my room. By the time the breakfast call comes, I've had time to scrunch down in the layers of quilts for a second snooze.

Mom doesn't like the coal furnace because soot falls like black snow on her sheets. When it's really cold, the sheets freeze on the line and Mom has to leave them outside until it's warm enough again to dry them out. Usually when that happens, she has to wash them over because of all the soot on them from being out on the line so long. Frozen clothes are so stiff they bend and Eddie wanted to try to make an airplane from a pillowcase like he does out of a sheet of paper. He didn't because he knew Mom would get mad. Eddie doesn't take to being scolded.

There are no furnace noises this morning because we'll be leaving the house after breakfast to go see Gramma. It's late enough in the spring that we really don't need a fire anyway.

My window is shaded by a thick bush full of fluffy white snowballs that keeps the sunlight from coming though strong enough for me to see my slippers. I grope under the bed for them and can feel the cat hair and dust on the linoleum. Mom would've had all that swept up. I wiggle into my robe and throw the belt around it as I head out the door. The hard packed path feels cold through my slippers as I trudge out to Mrs. Jimson's, the two-holer that stands behind the row of lilac bushes.

Just as I reach its door, Chauncy comes running, his wings flapping as if to shake off the morning dew. He's a red and gold and brown mass of oneryness from the top of his rooster crown to the tips of his wicked splayed-out claws

sharpening themselves on the run. I manage to jerk the door to just before he jumps me, but I know he'll be waiting. Maybe Dad will rescue me as he walks past to the barn to do the milking?

I wait and wait, but Dad doesn't come so I twist the wooden handle and peer out. No rooster in sight. Gathering the skirt of my robe tightly in my left hand, I make a mad dash for the house. Chauncy intercepts me on the path. He's been pecking at some potato peel scraps Dad pitched out on the house side of the lilac row. I scale the high fence that protects the garden, using the squares of wire as footholds until I gain a safe position on top. Chauncy dares me to come down, his beady eyes flashing, crimson wattles swinging and hackles bushed out as he shifts weight wildly on his two scaly legs.

Dad hears the ruckus and comes out scolding Chauncy and brandishing a broom at him while I scramble off the fence and run for the kitchen door.

"Cock-a-doodle-do-oo! Susan's a fraidy cat," smirks Eddie as I slide into my place at the table.

"Mom," I start to wail, but instead clamp my lips together like I do when Mom tries to give me castor oil. I push my oatmeal around with my spoon.

"Quit your day-dreaming," Eddie says with his 12-year-old's authority. "Dad'll be back and you'll still be sitting here in those dumb PJ's with Cinderella a-running



down the front."

I stuff my mouth with oatmeal and lift the mug of hot chocolate to my mouth to wash it down, glaring at Eddie through its steam. Someday I'd get even!

"Know what, Sis?"

"What?"

"I think this oatmeal looks like snot--you know like when Mr. Johnson clamps his finger on one side of his nose and blows out the other onto the dirt."

I gulp down the mouthful I am caught with and rinse the taste away with hot chocolate that scalds my tongue as Eddie runs outside.

I twirl the spoon in the oatmeal a bit, but it doesn't look good to eat now anyway so I just nibble at the toast.

"Susan," Dad scolds, "How come you're still dawdling over your food. Get yourself dressed so we can be off."

Eddie's face has an "I told you so" grin on it as he peers in at me from the porch. "Hey, Dad, I'll pour up the milk for you," he says, taking the enamel bucket from him.

I scoot off to get dressed and, when I return, Dad is at the pump on the back porch wetting down some newspapers which he wraps around the stems of lilac clumps. He pulls a Wonder Bread plastic bag with its red and yellow and blue circles up around the wet papers and ties it with a string.

"You're in charge of these," he says as he hands them to me. "Gramma told your mom how she's missing the smell of

them. She'll like having you bring her some."

I bury my face in the lilac blooms. The droplets of water clinging to them tickle my nose but I enjoy the damp coolness and sweet smell. I like walking up to Gramma's house with bouquets of them. While Gramma fixes them in a vase, I sit down in one of the ice cream parlor chairs and munch on cookies. Soon the room fills to overflowing with lilac smell from the bouquet Gramma has set on the table.

Gramma sits across from me. She likes to reminisce about when she was first married and Grandad would bring her bunches of lilacs. Her eyes are the color of the blue field violets and they dart back and forth between whatever she is working on at the table in front of her and my eyes.

Gramma always has to be busy with something. As she talks, she peels potatoes or snaps green beans or crochets. Row after row of creases circle her face and expand outward when she smiles or spreads her mouth open in mock surprise at some part in the story. She wears short sleeved cotton print dresses that zip up the front. She says her joints are old and contrary and these dresses are easy for her to get in and out of. As she snaps green beans in the bowl in front of her, her upper arms bounce. She calls them her Irish washer woman arms. These have lots of creases too.

Gramma likes most to tell stories about when she was a schoolteacher. That was when they lived on the farm and didn't have my mom and Uncle Albert yet.

Gramma walked four miles to the school and had to remove her shoes and stockings to wade a creek on the way. She was cold clear to the bone by the time she got a fire going in the potbelly stove. After the first year, Grandad bought her a beautiful black mare to ride to school. She'd tether it in the schoolyard until the end of the day. Gramma taught at a one room country school just like mine. Some of the boys at Gramma's school were a foot taller than she and she laughed about how she had to be on her toes to keep them behaving.

My favorite thing to do is to help Gramma gather eggs. We take the wicker egg basket and walk out to the hen house. I like to make faces at the roosters because Gramma has them fenced off and they can't get at me like Chauncy. Gramma's hens lay big brown eggs that are still warm when I reach among the feathers and straw into the lower nests for them.

Sometimes I watch Gramma work in her garden, either planting seeds or hoeing out weeds or digging up vegetables. In will go the little four pronged fork, guided by Gramma's work boot. Then the dirt comes pushing up out of the ground as Gramma's heel comes down hard on the back of the fork. As the dirt sifts out of the fork's prongs, the vegetables are left sitting on top.

"Hey, Gramma. Those carrots are white!"

Gramma laughs her soft chuckling laugh and explains

that they are parsnips. After we take our harvest into the kitchen and scrub off the dirt in the sink, she hands me a parsnip to taste. I don't like it. It still tastes like it has dirt on it.

When it is time to go home, Gramma will say to wait just a minute that she wants to send something to my mother. It'll be fresh vegetables or jelly or a jar of freshly ground coffee.

Gramma's coffee grinder is a square wooden box with a handle. As you crank the handle, the beans split open, releasing what Gramma calls their south of the border scent.

"Have you ever been south of the border Gramma?"

"No," she admits, "not unless you consider Arkansas to qualify," and she laughs. I laugh with her but I don't understand the joke.

I like the aroma of the coffee as it flows into the jar almost as much as Gramma likes the lilacs. I lift the lid off for extra whiffs as I walk down the path home.

"You put the lilacs in the car and then feed your kitty and we'll be off."

Eddie was already at the car. He had staked his claim to the front seat and looks smugly at me through the window of the '51 Chevy. His hair is greased over to one side and he has a stack of Superman comics on the seat beside him.

"Boy, are you going to get it from Mom for wearing your new Easter dress. Besides, people don't wear red to hospitals."

I look down at my outfit. Most of my dresses are in the dirty clothes. Mrs. Johnson has been helping with the laundry, but she hasn't come by to ask about it this week. I had decided Gramma would like to see my new Easter dress. It's a red nylon plisse, soft like Aunt Lucille wears, and it has big puffy sleeves. Mom ordered it from Alden's. The slip is a little long so I bunched it up at the waistline and buckled the white patent belt around the dress to hold the slip in place. The fleece jacket is new too. Don't people wear red to hospitals?

I fling the lilacs into the back seat and run back to the house to see what else is clean.

"Now what are you after?" Dad demands as I practically run him down in the hallway. His hands are full with two suitcases he has packed of things Mom has asked him to bring her.

"No-th-th-in'..." I stammer and backtrack to the porch to put out some dry food for Jeepers. He's curled in the corner of the porch lickin' his paws. The whiskers under his bottom lip are wet with fresh milk.

The trip is a good three hours and Eddie is happy to give up his front seat when we stop for gas so he can stretch out full length in the back seat to read his comics.

Miss Emma has told him comics are the work of the devil, but he reads them anyway. He just doesn't let her know he does.

I'm bored and begin counting the number of blue cars we pass. I prop my feet on the glove box, glancing at Dad to see if he's going to scold me because he's real particular with his new car, but he isn't paying any attention.

Soon there are too many blue cars to count and Dad has me helping him watch for Kingshighway. He uses his brakes a lot and rubs his left arm as some people honk at our car.

After we find the hospital, we have to drive around on the streets to find a place to park. We pull into a parking lot and then see a sign that says, "Doctors Only." Another area says "15 Minute Parking Only." Dad's forehead is getting red and sweaty. Finally someone pulls out of a place next to a meter and Dad parks there. He shoves lots of change into the meter.

We walk across a parking lot and round to the other side of a group of tall buildings. I wasn't expecting the hospital to be in more than one building and wonder if Dad knows where to go. He walks straight ahead as though he does. We enter through a double set of glass doors and walk down a hallway as wide as our house. The floor of red and yellow squares is shiny enough almost to see yourself. There are people scurrying everywhere, some in green cotton uniforms, some dressed in suits--but nobody in bright red. Was Eddie right?

Mom is standing next to Uncle Albert and reaches down to gather me up in her arms and hug me tight. This surprises me as Mom isn't much for hugging. Eddie says, "Hi, Mom" and allows a kiss on the cheek. She's wearing her long black coat with floppy cuffed sleeves and it looks wrinkled like she maybe has been sleeping in it. A rhinestone button holds it closed at the neck. Mom looks tired just like she did after canning several bushels of peaches Dad brought over from an orchard in Illinois. Only this time she looks sad too.

"You two kids must be starved after that long drive," says Aunt Lucille. "And I know just where we can go. There's a big cafeteria on the fourth floor with all kinds of things to eat. There's tuna sandwiches and soup and hamburgers and hot dogs and ice cream and soda pop. My treat! No arguing now," she says as she looks at Dad. "Helen's exhausted. She hasn't left this hospital in three days--just going back and forth from the waiting room couch to Mom's bedside. You and Albert are taking her to our house to see that she gets a nice relaxing soak in the tub and a nap. You know, Stanley," she says in a hushed voice, "Mom keeps complaining of her foot itching--the one that's no longer there. It's tough on Helen to deal with that twenty-four hours a day. It was hard enough making the decision to let them amputate; now she has to listen to Mom moan when they dress the leg and sometimes they have to snip

away at it if more gangrene appears. It's wearing Helen down seeing Mom in so much pain and now the doctors think Mom's developing pneumonia. It's just too much." She makes a 'tsk-tsk' noise with her tongue and shakes her head.

I try to catch Mom's eye, but she has turned her head aside. After a moment she swallows hard.

"No. I don't want to go until I've taken the kids up to see Mom. Then I'll go rest."

I know that tone of voice. It's the one I hear when there's no use asking a second time to stay overnight with a friend or when Eddie pulls one too many tricks. Dad knew it too.

Alright, Helen, we'll do it your way. Lucille, why don't you and Albert go ahead home. I'll be here with Helen."

Aunt Lucille's nose wrinkles funnily and her freckles grow brighter, but she tugs at her jacket hem as though to set things right. "Whatever you say," she says. "Say, Susan, before I leave, would you like me to take you to the ladies room so you can freshen up for Gramma? Your dad can hold those flowers for you."

I pass the lilacs over to my dad and then let myself be guided down the hall by Aunt Lucille. I want to ask her if the red dress is alright, but I remember Mom talking about how flashy Aunt Lucille is, always wearing those loud colored clothes. Is Auntie flashy? I look up at the



freckled face with the little puff of extra chin and the reddish brown curls with gray wisps around her face. Gold earrings rock back and forth against her neck as we walk down the hall and her purple suit with the bright yellow pansies make a soft swish. I twist a little as I walk to make my dress sound the same way.

In the restroom Auntie fusses over me. "My you look pretty in that dress. Red's a good color for you. Sets off your blonde braids and blue eyes. Here, let me fix your slip. It's playing peekaboo! We'll just put in a couple of safety pins to make it stay where it belongs. There now. Won't Gramma be proud to see you! But don't expect her to talk much, Sweetie. She's been awfully sick."

After Uncle Albert and Aunt Lucille leave, Dad hands the lilacs to me and then takes Eddie to the cafeteria for a sandwich. Mom and I go on up to Gramma's room. Mom says all of us at once would be too many in Gramma's small room and that Eddie could come while I eat lunch.

I count the numbers that flash as the elevator goes up. Each time it stops at a floor, my stomach runs ahead.

"Does Gramma know I'm coming to see her?"

"Yes, I think so Susan."

"Maybe we can play a game together? Maybe it'll make Gramma feel better if I stay overnight with her instead of going out to Aunt Lucille's?"

The elevator door opens on the eleventh floor before

Mom can answer. A pudgy woman in green with a green cotton duster cap on her head is pushing a cart loaded with bunched up sheets down the hall. The hallway smells awful. Kind of like shot day at school. There are doors all up and down, but Mom heads right to Gramma's without even looking at the number.

Inside a nurse is whizzing the bed curtains along their metal rod so that Gramma's bed is visible. A wash basin full of yellowy stained gauze is on a stand by the bed with some scissors and tubes of salve and a rolled-up piece of fresh gauze.

"Just finished dressing this young lady's leg," the nurse explains as she gathers up the basin and other paraphernalia. "Well, look here who's come to visit you Grandma. And I do believe those are lilacs! My aren't you the lucky one. Now you just have a nice chat with this pretty little girl and I'll go find a vase for these lovely flowers." She works as she talks and has Gramma's bed cranked up so she can see me better and has taken the flowers along with the other things and is out the door and humming a happy tune as she marches briskly away down the hall. I grin after her until I catch Mom's stern face looking at me.

"You must remember, Susan, that Gramma is very sick and so we must be quiet."

I tiptoe over to Gramma's bed. I can feel the other

two ladies staring at me from their beds across the room. One says something that doesn't make any sense and Mom looks down at me and shakes her head as if to say never mind. The other lady moans 'nurse, nurse' as her bony hand shakes the siderail of her bed.

This reminds me of when I went with Dad to take Gramma to visit Great-Uncle Wallace in a nursing home. He shared a room with another man who was across the room from him by a window. This man kept motioning for me to come over to him and Dad told Mom later how surprised he was when I did.

"She was very kind to the old fellow and I was just sure she would be too scared to go to him. He was all scrawny and whiskery and they had him strapped down but he had kicked the sheet back. There was a stench about him, too. All the poor soul wanted was for someone to pull the curtains back so he could see out."

I hadn't thought about being kind. From where I stood it looked like the old man had on a diaper and I wanted to get close enough to see if he really did. He did.

There is some kind of rounded object where Gramma's leg would have been that keeps the sheet lifted up off Gramma on that side. I don't know what to say to her. All I can think of is how is Gramma going to hoe in her garden and feed her chickens and climb up to get the puzzles off the top shelf of the armoire with just one leg?

"Why don't you give Gramma a kiss," Mom whispers.

Gramma's cheek is warm and papery and there is a big sunken-in place because her teeth are in a cup on the dresser. Her hands, usually busy snapping beans or darning socks or searching for puzzle pieces, lay slightly curled on top of the blanket.

"It's Susan, isn't it? My little Susan. Let Gramma rest just a little more and then we'll go gather the eggs." The voice is weak and raspy and the hand she reaches out for mine is trembly. "Tell me, did you bring Mr. Jeepers up with you?"

"No, I couldn't...I mean...they don't allow cats in hospitals, do they?" I look at Mom for help.

"Tell Gramma about the spelling bee at school," Mom coaxes. "Dad said you did real well."

Gramma nods her head to my remarks, but before long her mouth droops and she's snoring.

Mom pats Gramma's hands and brushes the stray hairs off her forehead. "Let's give Gramma a chance to rest. We'll go find Dad and Edward in the cafeteria and then I'll bring Edward up to visit."

The cafeteria is large and noisy. People walk in, grab a tray and move quickly down the line, seeming to know exactly where everything is they want. For me there are too many choices and the whole process is confusing. What if

you took something here and further down the line there was something you wanted instead? Do you have to return the first item to where you picked it up? Wouldn't you lose your place in line? I grab a ham salad sandwich and a carton of milk though a huge piece of chocolate pie looks mighty good.

Despite all the clatter and rush, people at the tables speak in hushed voices. Dad had been watching for us and waves us to the table he and Eddie have by the window.

"So, how are things going, Helen?"

"Stanley, we have to do something about Lucille. She's taken Mom's wedding band and watch. For safekeeping, she says. And the nurses aren't looking after Mom right. If I weren't staying right there in the room, Mom wouldn't get any care at all because she's not strong enough to push the buzzer. I wish we had kept her at home. She'd at least be at ease there."

"There, there Helen. You know we couldn't do for Mom at home like they can here. You're just getting yourself worn down. You should let Albert or Lucille spell you once in a while."

"Depend on that woman to take care of Mom! No. I'm fine."

Mom sits up straight in her chair and drinks a cup of black coffee and then she and Eddie leave to go up to Gramma's room. Dad walks them to the door and comes back to

our table with a piece of chocolate cake.

"Thought maybe I could talk you into sharing this with me."

I grin. Dad and I are chocolate lovers. When I go into Cobalt Village with him on Saturdays, he takes me to Patterson's Five and Dime and has the girl behind the counter lift the block of chocolate from its glass case and cut off a big piece for us.

"Did Gramma like your lilacs?"

"I guess so."

Dad clears his throat. "You know, from up on the top floor of this here building, you're supposed to be able to see the Mississippi River. Why don't you and I go check it out?"

From the top floor we watch coal barges inching down the Mississippi. They look the same size as the pieces of bark Becky and I sail down the creek in Mr. Johnson's field. In the springtime there's lots of water, but long about July our boats get stuck in weeds. I can see the Admiral, a steamship Aunt Lucille took us on once, and it's tiny too.

Later Mom sits with Eddie and me in a downstairs lounge that has a TV. Dad is up in the room with Gramma.

"I'm so glad you two were able to come see Gramma. It meant a lot to her to see you again." Mom's eyes are moist. "You can go up to her room again later. After she's had

some rest. Won't that be nice?"

"I think I'll just wait and visit with Gramma when she comes home," I pipe up.

Eddie has been sitting with his nose in the TV, but now he turns on me. "You stupid idiot! You never know nothing. Gramma ain't never coming home. She's dying!"

I stare. I expect Mom to scold Eddie for his mean words but instead she rummages in her pocket for a crumpled up hanky and begins wiping her eyes and her body shakes.

My insides feel strange. Like they all are pushed together and make a big empty space way down deep. I wish I were at Aunt Lucille's right now.

Eddie stays at the hospital and goes back up to see Gramma, but I leave with Aunt Lucille. We go see "Bambi" and my heart thumps like Thumper's foot when Bambi and his mother try to outrun the fire. Afterwards Auntie takes me to eat at a place where we watch a man twirling dough above his head.

"He's making pizza," Auntie explains. "It's something brand new that they wouldn't have in Cobalt Village yet."

When we get back to Aunt Lucille's place, Dad and Uncle Albert are sitting across from each other in the living room, but they aren't watching the TV that Uncle Albert bought just last year. Mom is stretched out on Aunt Lucille's bed, her head resting on her elbow.

"She's gone, Lucille," Uncle Albert says as he allows Aunt Lucille to hug him to her like he is a small boy.

Eddie is sitting in the window seat with his legs up and his arms circling his knees. "Well," he sneers, "Did you enjoy the movie?"

There's a lot of worrying the next few days about things like whether the hospital had kept Gramma's leg so it could be buried with her and was Gramma's favorite song "Crossing Over Jordan" or "In the Sweet Bye and Bye." Mom says she told the undertaker to make sure Gramma has on her wedding band and wristwatch. "Those are hers and I want them left with her regardless what anyone else says, I told him," she declares to Dad.

Gramma looks pretty laid out in her casket. She has on a lavender dress with white lace edging and her silvery hair is in soft curls against the satin pillow tufted up and cradling her head like she's Queen Victoria.

"That rouge just don't look natural," Mom complains to Dad.

The same black ambulance that took Gramma to the hospital takes her to the cemetery, but now they call it a hearse. The cemetery is over the road that goes to our school. Everyone drives real slow and I can hear the gravel crunch underneath the tires. They take Gramma's casket out



and place it in the middle of a green carpet and then pile the flower baskets all around it. Our minister, Rev. Parker from the Methodist Church in Cobalt Village, says something about dust to dust and ashes to ashes and I start wondering how Gramma is going to get out of the casket to rise up in the sky to Heaven like Miss Emma says Christians do.

As we start to leave, I ask Eddie what they'll do after we're gone.

"Will they open the casket so Gramma can get out?" I whisper.

"So she can get out? No, stupid. She's dead. Next they put the casket in the ground and shovel dirt over it."

"No," I scream. I run back to the casket and try to lift the heavy lid. "No, no, no!"

"Oh the poor child," the neighbor ladies say as they wring their hands. Dad carries me away from the casket and Gramma is left with no way to escape to Heaven.

We have an auction and sell what is left of Gramma's things after Mom and Uncle Albert go through and take what they want. Mom tells Dad that she thinks while she and Dad and Uncle Albert were with the undertaker making arrangements for the funeral, Lucille came out to the house and took some things. She was just sure Gramma had had Great-Aunt Ceil's silver serving tray and then there was Grandmother Claredy's jewelry. "But they're not there now,

Stanley."

I cry when the ice cream parlor chairs are loaded up into some stranger's truck. Aunt Lucille tells Mom she should keep them, but Mom says no, we need the money to pay Gramma's hospital bill. The house is to be sold for the same reason and what's left over will be divided between Mom and Uncle Albert.

I miss Gramma but I miss Auntie more. She and Uncle Albert moved to California a few weeks after the funeral. She told me before she left that she wanted me to come visit them next summer and Mom said maybe. But I don't think I'll get to do that anymore than Gramma can dig out of that casket to go to Heaven or Auntie and I will get to be sisters someday.

SNAKES IN THE BRUSH ARBOR

I first had cause to reflect on religion the summer before my tenth birthday. My grandmother died and I didn't like the idea of never seeing her again. If Christianity had the remedy for that, I was ready to listen.

My parents sold Gramma's house to a family with four kids whose aim in life seemed to be to erase all traces of Gramma having existed. It might have worked out if one of them had been of an age to be my friend, but the closest was six-year-old Laurel. Shelly and Steven were four-year-old twins and Michael, a toddler in diapers. Since Gramma's house was in sight of ours, I was subjected day after day to their effect on my memories.

They played cowboys and Indians in Gramma's garden and had shoot-outs in her chicken pen. Their parents worked at Trimfoot Shoe Factory and the babysitter just sat and read Nancy Drew mysteries while the kids trampled flower beds and climbed up and broke down the spindly limbs on Gramma's

mimosas.

I began going for walks in the woods so I wouldn't have to watch. I took a notebook and wrote poems while perched on a tree stump or balanced on a loop of the fox grape vines that drooped down like rugged brown spider webs between the trees. I wanted to be alone with my thoughts of Gramma. I needed her to be somewhere other than in that closed up casket buried in the cemetery.

One day I looked up at the sun dappling through the oak leaves and saw a snake sunning himself on another section of my grapevine. He was close enough that if he fell asleep and let his tail droop, it'd be tickling my neck. I hightailed it out of there, but was up in the woods again the next day. I wasn't afraid of snakes; it was just that that one had taken me by surprise. Snakes were common both on the road and up in the woods. If you came across one sudden and had to jump backwards, or in some cases over it, that snake always became a copperhead or rattler in the retelling. All snakes were symbols of Satan and any which way you managed to get the best of them was a good story.

Aside from the sorrow of losing Gramma, life was treating me alright. My older brother Eddie was finally leaving me alone. No more rolling me up in a quilt and tickling my feet or chasing me with bloody chicken heads or pig's tails.

I entered fifth grade in the fall which meant I had the

same teacher and the same desk, but different books. I could look out the window at the community cemetery where we buried Gramma in the spring. Always before I was the first one to suggest playing hide and seek there during noon recess, but this year I hedged. I was happy when Joey Winston brought his volleyball and we played dodge ball in the schoolyard as well as "Annie, Annie Over," "The Farmer Takes a Wife" and "Mother, May I." We also played softball and was Eddie ever crowing when he finally hit a home run that cleared the top of the second base sugar maple. He almost took a tumble rounding third trying to see if June Ann, a girl he was sweet on, was watching.

School slipped into familiar routines of nature hikes, spelling bees, Miss Emma's monthly flannel board bible stories, and the county bookmobile visits. This year I had outgrown Flicka, Ricka, and Dicka and discovered biographies.

The first week of December we had a box social. As we drove to the schoolhouse, snow was falling on the gravel alongside the road like Mom's flour sifter dusts powdered sugar on bon-bons. Our schoolhouse soon filled with giggling women and good humored farmers and miners spiffied up in dress trousers and white shirts. Mr. Burlbaugh, our auctioneer, was caught up in first snow magic the same as the rest of us and kept the bidding steady and high. Eddie thought he was bidding on June Ann's box and handed over his

entire savings for the widow Lam's box.

Miss Emma played "Go Tell Aunt Gertie the Old Gray Goose is Dead" and "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" and everyone sang along. Mr. Johnson must have added a smidgen of something to his coffee before he came because he was all wound up and told coon hunting stories, even to Miss Emma.

It was later than usual when people bundled up to head home. We opened the door and gasped. There was so much snow that the cars, shadowed in the spotlight mounted on the big oak used for first base, looked like giant white turtles. The men took turns uncovering them with the school's broom.

"Hey, Burlbaugh!" Mr. Johnson yelled as he cleared snow from the hood of a car, "Looks like this one's yours. Here, catch the broom!"

Our schoolhouse was at the end of a narrow gravel road that wound down a couple of hills. Once the cars were warmed up and revving like for a rally, we started out. The caravan would wait at the steep spots for the men to gather around each car and coax it up and over to the next flat spot. The women snuggled in the cars and swapped "do you remember the year" stories.

It took two or three hours to get the cars out to the main highway, but we passed the time playing tag in the deep snow in the woods beside the road. We shook smaller trees to make the snow crash down on each other in the dark. I

spied Edward under a sycamore tree where he had June Ann trapped between the tree and the fence and was kissing her. I shook the tree good and then ran for my life, tripping and falling "splat" on my face. I thought I would suffocate when Eddie straddled me and held my face in the snow; but my best friends, Becky and Charlotte, came to my rescue by dumping snow down the collar of Eddie's jacket.

We got home so late from the box supper that we didn't make it to church on Sunday morning and then school was called off for Monday and Tuesday. Snow holidays ordinarily didn't happen until January or February.

Dad took a cement scoop and drug it over the snow to make a run for our sleds. We hiked up into the woods, careened down through the trees, across the field, and came to rest in the froze-over pond. Back at the house afterwards, we fought over who got to stand on the floor registers to thaw out.

We never did calm down that year until after Christmas. We were making paper chains, stringing popcorn and singing "Jingle Bells" a good three weeks before the Christmas program. Mr. Snodgrass got tired of holding his finger in the dike and used Christmas words for the spelling bees and assigned us Christmas stories and poems to write. Christmas fell in snowflake designs on black construction paper we held out the windows and in word problems Mr. Snodgrass made up for math lessons.



As the holiday vacation neared, we planned our usual program. There was the contemporary skit about kids learning the true meaning of Christmas, the Mary and Joseph play, group songs, and individual poems. Mr. Snodgrass assigned the poems according to ability and we didn't have much say in the matter.

The night before the program, Becky and Charlotte slept over at my house. We found a poem in one of Mom's ladies magazines along with a full page illustration of Santa and his reindeer flying through the sky above San Francisco, looking down on apartments full of swankily dressed people having holiday parties. We put lipstick on our cheeks for rouge and rolled up notebook paper to look like long cigarettes and strutted around my room with our granny gowns pulled off one shoulder.

"Wouldn't it be fun to recite this poem instead of those hokey ones about trees and wise men?" Becky speculated.

The next night the program swished right along. If the halo I wore for my angel costume had been real, it would have shattered on my shoulders like golden dandruff. We'd been through the plays, the songs and all of the poems... but mine. After my recitation would be the traditional "Up on the Housetop" ending with ole Nick himself's grand entry.

Mr. Snodgrass announced I would recite "The Angel's Story." I slipped out between two muslin sheet stage

curtains and began:

"Christmas is the time to guzzle good cheer,  
Shouted Santa to his prancing reindeer.  
And he raised his glass high in a joyful toast  
To holiday revelers all down the coast."

Miss Emma stiffened on the piano bench and stared at me over the tops of her square rimmed glasses as I raised my imaginary glass high.

"Serve your guests the best of the brew,  
A snifter of eggnog with a dash of ...."

I didn't get to finish because Mr. Snodgrass had me by the neck dragging me behind the curtain. Miss Emma gave the signal for "Up on the Housetop" and the curtains were whisked open to show the entire school singing in unison. I was plunked down in a chair behind one of the side curtains along with the props; but Becky and Charlotte gave me a thumbs up sign behind their backs as they sang at the top of their lungs. I was lectured at home by Mom and Dad, at school by Mr. Snodgrass in front of everyone, and again at school by Miss Emma who said God would be very unhappy that I had blasphemed Jesus' birthday. Personally, I thought Jesus might of thought it a funner party than the one planned for Him; but I had the good sense not to say so.

By springtime I was a contrite participant in the bible verse memorizing program Miss Emma's church sponsored.

For the 23rd Psalm, I received a bookmark with a picture of a shepherd walking by a creek with a staff in his hand. John 3:16 got me a pencil. Romans 10:1-21 garnered a book of prayers for young people. For camp I would need to complete a worksheet for each of the books in the New Testament. I pretty much knew Dad and Mom wouldn't let me go anyway. For a Bible, I needed to be able to quote 100 verses. Becky and I searched out all the shortest and most easily remembered ones. My favorite was I Thessalonians 5:16; "Rejoice evermore."

At noon recesses, we walked across the field to the cemetery and practiced saying scripture.

"How do you think people get to Heaven?" I asked one day. We were sitting under a tree straight across from where Gramma was buried.

"By accepting Christ as personal savior, of course. I'll pray with you if you want."

"No, I don't mean that. I mean HOW do they do it. If they're closed up inside of boxes and buried in the ground, how can they rise up to Heaven?"

"It's only the soul that has to rise up," Becky declared. "So you see, it doesn't matter that the body is closed up in a casket and buried in the ground. The soul is no longer in the body anyway. It leaves the body when the person quits breathing. If they ain't Christians, then they go immediately to Hell to burn everlasting. If they ARE

Christians, they rise up to Heaven and join the other Christians that went before."

Becky was the expert. Her uncle on her mother's side was a Baptist preacher and her father's family were Assembly of God who went to Wednesday night prayer meetings, Sunday school and Sunday morning worship and Sunday night services.

One night during summer vacation when Charlotte was spending the night with me, I quizzed her as well about what happens after you die.

"I had a cousin who died three years ago," she said. "Sometimes he comes back to visit. He doesn't really talk and you can't see him, but you can feel his presence."

"The poor thing, wasn't he a Christian?"

"Of course he was."

"But Becky says you go straight to Heaven if you are a Christian."

"No you don't! You go to purgatory, and if you were a little kid, then your family has to pray for you for years before you're let into Heaven."

"I didn't know Catholics prayed. I thought you just said Hail Mary's."

"Well, that just shows how much you don't know," Charlotte said with exasperation.

Charlotte convinced me that the evanescent light flashing on at intervals in my room, sometimes high in the far corner, sometimes low by the door, was the soul of my

grandmother. I lay in bed with the sheet pulled up to just under my nose and followed the light around the room with my eyes.

When I told Mom about it the next day, she pooh-poohed the whole thing.

"Nothing but a lightning bug that got trapped in your room," she insisted. "Gramma is with God now and we just have to have faith that we'll see her again some day in Heaven."

Later, I pondered that particular night when in the descending dusk of warm summer nights I saw the harmless lights of fireflies darting high and low. Who to believe? At Becky's church people did all kinds of things that Mom would sneer at. They talked in tongues and prayed to heal each other and had visions. One prayer meeting night, I saw a lady get so carried away talking in tongues that she keeled right over. Luckily she fell onto the soft carpet that went up the aisle.

Gramma appeared again on the Fourth of July. This time she was dressed in her everyday cotton dress that zipped up the front. I had just started out to Mrs. Jimson's, our outhouse. Nobody else was up yet and the only noise was Chauncy crowing. The air was misty with the sun filtering through the dewfall. Gramma was standing by the sumac bush at the corner of the house, only not really standing. Her feet weren't touching the ground. She was looking straight

at me and her face broke out in wonderful creases as she smiled, like it was washed with halo after halo.

"Gramma?" I asked in a low voice. There was no response, but the morning suddenly became as clear and bright as midday. She pointed to the sky. I looked up and saw clouds that were fluffy white on the bottom but had a rim of light at the top. One cloud descended as I watched and I saw Jesus standing on it, reaching down toward Gramma. I covered my eyes. When I peeked out, Gramma was gone and so were the clouds and the bright day. Once again it was chilly morning mist and goosebumps covered my arms and legs.

This time I didn't tell Mom. Only Becky. Becky was sure Gramma was trying to reassure me. Otherwise why would she appear in broad daylight? Gramma wanted me to know that her soul was not buried in a hole in the ground.

Sometimes on my poetry treks into the woods, I would see a shaft of light at a distance and would wonder if maybe Gramma or God were trying to tell me something.

Becky went off to camp and I was stuck at home. It worked out alright because the people in Gramma's house had found a new babysitter, a pious young girl named Evelyn who planned to be a missionary. We studied the Bible together and made up lesson plans for the Lucas kids. They didn't get much religion. Their parents spent evenings playing cards with friends and weekends watching baseball on TV and drinking beer. At first we met in their living room, but

that didn't seem very sacred. We decided to build a brush arbor at the edge of the woods so it would be like real church services.

It took us a good week to build the church. For benches, we scavenged big round logs from Dad's woodpile and half rolled and half carried them across the field, knocking down blackeyed susans and chigger weed on the way. The kids followed along, straying over to the overgrown ditch now and then to pick blackberries. They helped us scour the woods for fallen branches for our ceiling. Once three-year-old Michael froze in his tracks because a snake was coiled up right in front of him. Evelyn and I prayed that the snake would slither away if God was really in favor of us having the brush arbor, and it did. We had to stop work long enough, though, to go change Michael's pants.

We found some binder twine in the barn and used this to lash sticks between trees. Next we laid more sticks end to end across those and piled on the branches.

By lunchtime it would be too hot to work so we'd traipse back to the house to have Koolaid and bologna sandwiches. We took turns picking seed ticks and chiggers off the kids.

When the brush arbor was complete, we had Shelly and Laurel pick a bouquet of flowers, zinnias mostly from Mom's garden, but also some Queen Anne's lace that grew along the ditch. We trooped up to our new church singing "There's A

Church in the Valley by the Wildwood."

First we held Sunday school and I told the kids about the prodigal son. Next we sang more songs. Evelyn had some dog-eared songbooks her aunt had given her and the kids held these, but Laurel was the only one old enough to read. Evelyn strummed out the tune on her guitar so we got along alright. In the Methodist church, we always read Bible scripture before the sermon, so I insisted on doing this. I recited from memory to impress Evelyn. Then she gave the sermon. We didn't have altar call for the first few services because we didn't think the kids would understand yet. Too, I didn't want to let Evelyn know I had never been saved.

When Becky got back from camp, she came to help. We sang songs and testified and swore off using makeup EVER because that was the devil's doing.

Meetings at the brush arbor became good opportunities for storytelling. The rule was they had to be church related. Becky told one about a brush arbor revival her uncle had.

"He was preaching at an evening meeting about the garden of Eden." she began.

"'And brothers and sisters,' he was saying with a sweat drop hanging from the end of his nose, 'still today we sinners are constantly being tempted by Satan. He may not come in the form of a snake, but he comes, my friends, he



comes.' His voice had gotten raspy and he was all bent over with one arm on the podium for support. People were saying "Amen, Brother," and staring up at him when a lady in the back row screamed. There in the aisle was a six-foot-long copperhead slithering down toward the podium."

"One woman fainted, benches toppled, and the widow Lutz cussed out Elizabeth Avery for stepping on her bunion. Said "God Damn" right there in church! And Uncle? You know what he did? Just as cool as you please, he says, 'Well HELLO, Lucifer.'"

"Was Lucifer a friendly snake?" queried Michael.

"Just like the one dangling on that bush above your head," Becky said. Michael screamed and fell over himself trying to both get up and run at the same time.

"So what happened to the snake?" Laurel wanted to know.

"No one knew," Becky told us, "but they had to build a new brush arbor because none of the women would come back to that one."

The kids were always dragging in turtles and toads they'd find either in the woods or by Dad's stock pond. That's how Shelly ended up with a wart on her hand. We had tried to warn her, but she wouldn't listen. We decided to pray away the wart like they did other afflictions at Becky's Assembly of God church. We gathered in our brush arbor just after Mr. and Mrs. Lucas left for work. First we

had the kids scout around for soft green moss to kneel on. Then we had Shelly sit on the moss with her afflicted hand spread out on top of the Bible. We had trouble getting Michael to cooperate, but Laurel and Steven were older and obeyed completely when asked to get down on their knees and bow their heads and pray along with us.

"Oh Jesus," Becky implored, "look with favor on our sister Shelly."

"Ain't your sister," Michael interrupted. Evelyn gave him a stern look and he walked away pouting.

"She didn't mean to sin," Becky continued. "She's just a curious ignorant little girl. Take away this affliction that has been visited upon her and give her a chance to walk in Thy favor again." We sprinkled pond water on her wart and talked in tongues for awhile and then dismissed everyone from the service. We told Shelly if God could see she was a repentant sinner, He would take the wart away. She must have been afraid she wasn't repentant enough. She bit at the wart until it became infected and her mother took her to Dr. Burrows to have it burned off.

Evelyn told me God would talk to me if I would just look for the ways He talked.

"Look for signs. Ask for them. Like tell God if He really wants you to go visit lonely old Mrs. Lam up the road, then show it by having Jeepers meow RIGHT THEN."

It didn't take long to learn what kinds of signs were acceptable. God talked to me in swaying branches and flitting birds and ripened tomatoes.

We held our brush arbor meetings before lunch and then Evelyn would have the kids take a nap in the afternoon. Half the time she would ask me to stay with the kids while she went up in the brush arbor to meditate. I didn't mind because I could watch TV while they slept and if I went on home, Mom would have chores for me.

One afternoon in late August, Michael got stung by a wasp as he slept and his cheek swole up. I sent Laurel to the brush arbor for Evelyn. She came back in tears.

"Evelyn whupped me for disturbing her, but she ain't supposed to be taking my daddy's beer up there anyway...nor k-i-s-s-ing Eddie," she sobbed.

Evelyn wasn't far behind her.

"You can go home now, Susan. Thank you for your help." she said curtly. Then, examining Michael, "My goodness, Mikey, you really are a baby. I've seen worse sweat bee bites."

It didn't bother me for Evelyn to be so gruff because I had something else to gloat about. Should I tell the folks directly about Eddie drinking beer and kissing Evelyn in the brush arbor, or should I hold it over his head? It sure would be something to see him get his hide tanned, but bet I

could have him gathering eggs and shucking corn and the like for months for not telling on him!

Our summer vacation came to an abrupt end that day. Mr. and Mrs. Lucas were late getting home. From down at our place, I could hear Mr. Lucas singing from the car. He blasted the horn more than once for Evelyn to get out there so he could take her home.

About an hour later Laurel was sent down to our house to ask Dad to drive Mrs. Lucas to town because there had been an accident.

"Looked like Clyde lost control of the car going around that hairpin curve on Swamp Valley Road," Dad reported back to us when he returned. "For the life of me I don't know why the man chose to take that road instead of the highway. Poor Evelyn didn't have a chance--thrown from the car and then it rolled over her as it toppled down the bank."

That was the first time I remember feeling bad about Eddie feeling bad. Together we tore apart the brush arbor and made a bonfire out in the field from the sticks and moss and seats.

"I ain't never gonna drink that stuff again and I don't want to ever catch you doing it either. Hear me, Sis!" Eddie had tears streaking down his face as he jabbed at the fire.

We said every good thing we could think of to say about

Evelyn while we tended the fire. . . and have never mentioned her to one another since.

Mr. Lucas must have been in real hot water over the accident because he was down asking Dad to testify that he was sober when he left to take Evelyn home.

"I'm right sorry, Clyde, but I just can't do that. I wasn't even here when you left."

"You could SAY you were, Stanley. What are neighbors for?" He was holding his baseball hat in his hand and studying his feet. Just then Mom called me into the house so I don't know what else was said, but I know Dad didn't testify and that, during the fall, the Lucas family moved.

For sixth grade I had a new teacher. Mr. Hollinger. On Sundays he was a Baptist minister so he was more than happy to allot school time for memorizing bible verses. That was one of the reasons I earned enough credits to go to summer bible camp. We also had extra long noon recesses because he generally put his head down on the desk and fell asleep on top of his open Bible. Even when we played "Annie, Annie Over" with the ball rolling down each side of the sheetmetal schoolhouse roof, he slept.

The closer to camp time, the more I wanted to go. I cleared the table without being asked at suppertimes and even emptied the scraps into the stinky slopbucket we kept on the back porch for the pigs. By the time information on

camp arrived, I had cleaned the windows with ammonia water and pulled the weeds out of the strawberry patch. Edward fetched the mail the day it came and lay the letter down beside Mom at the table. She pushed the mail aside until after lunch and I squirmed.

"Anything important in the mail, Mom?" I finally asked as she started to stack the plates.

"Oh, not really. Just the Capper's Weekly and the electric bill and some letter from the Nazarene Church probably wanting a donation."

"It might have to do with camp?" I volunteered.

"Oh? Why?"

"Because I earned enough credits this year to go. Becky went last year and will be again this year and it doesn't cost anything. Just some spending money for candy bars and soda pop and I don't have to have those. And you don't have to take me there. Just into the courthouse where they have a bus for everybody."

"My! Sounds like you have answers for everything."

"But she didn't tell you the main reason," piped up Eddie. Becky found herself a boyfriend there last year. Right Sis?"

That, I figured, was the end of camp for this year.

"We'll look at the letter tonight--after supper when your dad will have time. Meanwhile you skedaddle up to Mrs. Garney's with these eggs."

I flew up to Mrs. Garney's and skipped down the gravel road home. Mom hadn't said NO to camp. She just said wait.

After supper Eddie went off to his Saturday night sock hop and I volunteered to do dishes. Dad and Mom lingered at the table with their coffee and talked about camp.

"No worse than all that nonsense she and that Evelyn dreamt up," was Dad's contention.

Mom wasn't so sure. She liked the Methodist church where we would sit in orderly fashion on cushioned benches and repeat phrases back to the minister and sing hymns.

"Their services are soothing and rational, Stanley. I'm afraid Susan is getting too strong a dose of this holyroller stuff."

At last Mom gave in. Maybe to help me forget the events of the previous summer.

I packed up for camp with excitement... and trepidation. I still was unsaved. Becky assumed because I went to church at Cobalt Village Methodist most every Sunday with my mom that I had been. Charlotte's church didn't believe in it so the subject never came up. I hadn't been about to let Evelyn know. Because of the fervor with which I quoted bible verses and sang hymns, Evelyn had assumed I was a born again Christian. It was getting embarrassing.

Dad drove me and Becky into Cobalt Village to load onto the camp bus for the hundred mile trip to an old creekside CCC camp. Once there, we were assigned a cabin and Becky

and I chose beds next to each other. There was one set of bunk beds and Faith from Taylorville, who knew how to play the accordion, took the top bunk. A wimpy thing named Lorene from Caruthersville slept beneath her. Faith would sit on her bunk in the evening, one foot under her and the other dangling down in Lorene's face, and play the accordion. This was my first experience at being with so many people my own age. In my class at school, besides Becky and Charlotte, there was only dippy Ernest.

I was glad that Eddie wasn't interested in bible camp. Had he been there, I might not have got to know Walter. He was a friend of Charles, Becky's boyfriend from last year. When we weren't involved in organized activities, the four of us would go for walks or play volleyball. Every night there would be evening services and Charles and Walter would come by our cabin and wait to walk us to chapel.

Camp rules were for us to be in our cabin by 10:00, but services were over at 9:00. By the third night, Becky and Charles were disappearing right after the final Amen. Walter and I walked around the grounds or sat on the chapel steps to talk to the camp counselor. Both he and Walter were St. Louis Cardinal fans.

The second week of camp we had a visiting evangelist. He and his wife taught afternoon bible study and every night he conducted services.

"You people don't know how fortunate you are," he



preached. "There are starving people in Africa. Starving for God's word and for food. We can help those people, but we need money. You may not think the five cents you would spend for a candy bar would help, but Sister and Brother, it will."

I put all the money I had brought with me for treats into the collection plate. Who needed candy bars when people were starving? Mrs. Stemple found out from Lorene who found out from me when I said I didn't have money for a Hershey bar because I chose to give my money to the starving Africans. Mrs. Stemple insisted on paying me back explaining that we, too, were recipients of the church's missionary program.

"It's just that this is a local program designed to bring God's word to poor farm families."

Not even Edward had ever made me feel as whipped down. I slunk off to my cabin to shine my shoes and paint my fingernails with the polish Faith had hid under her bed.

The next to the last night Becky confided that she and Charles had found the nurse's office wasn't locked at night.

"You and Walter come with us after services," she said. "There are cots in there and you can sit and, uh, TALK all you want without any grownup nosing in."

I didn't admit that I felt more comfortable having a grownup around to nose in. I really needn't have worried. Walter was more interested in the Cardinal's chances for

winning the pennant than in me. And actually I was more interested in clearing up the dilemma about being saved than in Walter.

The ev.angelist had stressed that the longer one waited to take Jesus Christ into his heart, the harder it was.

"Hearts get hardened," he warned. "It can get so the person has been bad for so long, he doesn't even know that he is living outside God's grace until it's too late."

Was my heart hardened? Surely it must be worth something that I studied my scriptures so faithfully?

The last day of camp was a Bible quoting contest and I had practiced over and over. I had it all planned. My winning scripture would be "And I am Alpha and Omega. The beginning and the end." Would my deception jinx my chances? But it wasn't as if I told people I had been saved! Nobody ever asked.

That night when services drew to a close and we started singing "Almost Persuaded," I knew it was now or never. What if I were to die in a car accident like Evelyn? What if I didn't make it to Heaven and never saw Gramma again? I stood and trembled until the final verse but still hadn't responded. Then the evangelist asked for all heads to bow while we sang the final verse a second time.

"Won't you come now," his voice intoned while we sang the words once more. "No one is looking. Only God but he's calling, tenderly calling. Y-e-s-s-s, he's calling for you

to come."

Sweat poured down my armpits and my legs shook as I made my way up the aisle. My face was burning and I wanted to turn and run outside, but it was too late. Rev. Coleman was beside me, coaxing me to kneel in prayer and the evangelist was praising God for one more lost lamb brought to the fold.

I kept waiting for some magical transformation. I stayed on my knees in prayer so long that Rev. Coleman's voice had a trace of agitation in his earnest prayer.

The evangelist finally announced, "Let us all circle round and shake the hand of this newest of God's children." Rev. Coleman helped me to my feet and everyone paraded by to shake my hand.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Becky asked in a cool voice as she gave my hand a quick shake.

Instead of the transformation I expected, I felt more confused than ever. Had I been rejected by God? Wasn't my heart pure enough? I decided God was testing me. I had to prove myself. I hurried past Walter waiting at the door and holed up in my cabin to study. I HAD to be the bible quoting champion to redeem myself...in my own eyes and God's if no one else's.

The competition next day wasn't as stiff as I expected. Becky held in until the sixth round and then stumbled over a verse I knew very well she had memorized forward and

backward. I saw her sneak out the door with Charles. By the tenth round, there was only me and Lorene, the wimp from Caruthersville. Then just me saying my "Alpha and Omega." There were lots of congratulations from Rev. Coleman and Mrs. Stemple and some of the camp counselors, but all my friends were outside playing volleyball or swimming.

As we rode home on the bus the next day, I decided not to come to bible camp next year. Too many hypocrites.

Becky and I were still friends, but not bosom buddies. When we entered junior high school, she volunteered my services to the assembly committee as "Bible quoting champion of Missouri."

Who needed yokels like her for a friend anyway! I joined the radio club, the nurse's club, the pep club, and the Thespians.

Eddie was too busy with jitterbugging and girls to note or care what I was about. I fell in love in eighth grade with a guy who could play a guitar and croon "Blue Suede Shoes." In ninth, it was the poet in the Thespian group who actually had memorized all of Tennyson's "The Talking Oak." These were loves on a spiritual plane, but finally got Eddie's attention when he caught me smoking behind the school with a guy who played the drums for The Cruisers, a rock and roll group.

"Dad, I think you should know what Susan's up to," he

announced at the dinner table. "Caught her smoking after school with that creep Dale Taggert. He's the guy who looks like a retard when he really lets loose on those drums," he added for my parent's edification.

Dad sighed. "Why, Susan, must everything be in excess? One year you're Saint Joan and the next, well. . ."

I had no defense. For two months after, I wasn't allowed to attend dances at the teen center, nor stay overnight with my new friend Jackie who lived in town.

## THE CHOKE COLLAR

My folks and I drove past stubbly fields and clusters of hardwood barely visible in the predawn mist between St. Louis and Fort Leonard Wood. A flock of starlings swooped down upon a lone elm, their dark shapes falling into place on its leafless limbs like shards of black glass in a kaleidoscope. I sighed and doubled my legs up in the seat to nap.

I hadn't wanted to make this trip to visit my brother. Dad and Mom insisted, thinking it might cheer me up. I'd been in a bad mood ever since receiving notice that I was only runner-up for a scholarship to attend the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

As we entered the fort grounds, a squadron paraded in ghostlike unison across a grassy arena in the dim morning light.

"I had a gal and her name was Sue.

Now I give Uncle Sam his due."

I grinned. The marching soldiers looked like a scene from a

Charlie Chaplin flick.

We passed a sheetmetal quonset surrounded by a chain link fence. Tanks in camouflage paint were lined up beside it, looking like a Tonka truck display at K-Mart.

Across from the fort post office was the chapel. A spindly tree, maybe a dogwood but March was too early to tell, was in the yard and a cross was on top of the building. Next to the chapel was the theater and Eddie had said his barrack was just behind the theater. My brother Eddie was a platoon sergeant and thought he was hot stuff.

There he was. My big brother, my keeper, my albatross. Actually I care a lot for Eddie. It's just that for the last few years all my friends were fair game for him to date, but his buddies were strictly off-limits for me.

"Well aren't we the young lady now." Eddie stood me at arm's length and then enfolded me in a big bear hug. "Got someone for you to meet," he whispered.

That was the first I noticed someone else standing in front of the barrack.

"Jim, this is my sister, Susan. And just remember, it's not every private in my platoon that I'd introduce her to."

Be honest, Eddie, I thought to myself. It's not anybody in pants you'd introduce me to. This guy's probably a real dud despite his George Hamilton good looks.

"Susan. My pleasure." Jim extended his hand in a



crisp, soldierly manner. I blushed as I realized that I was so intent on looking into his eyes that I was keeping a grip on his hand.

"I thought I'd show you folks around the fort today but then, for the rest of the weekend, Jim's family has invited us out to their farm. It's not far. Just in Waynesville. The Stacys have been like a second family to me and I'm anxious for you all to meet them."

Ah hah! Bet Jim has a sister who's turned my brother's head.

I was surprised. He didn't have a sister and his folks were down to earth as dandelions. Mr. Stacy owned over five hundred acres and leased about seven hundred more for grazing his holsteins. Mrs. Stacy was as stoic and sweet as Mom and had just as many cans of beets, carrots, peaches and pears in her cellar. I could see immediately why Eddie felt at home with them.

The next day Jim, Eddie and I went squirrel hunting. Eddie launched into some stories about my tomboy days when he tricked me into snipe hunting.

"You should have seen Susan holding that sack open waiting for me to shoo those snipes her direction. Boy was she mad when she found out the truth!"

"I guess you don't care much for hunting then."

"No," I laughed, "but the woods make me feel virginal." I blushed uncontrollably and then stammered, "I

mean in the sense of renewal."

"We know what you mean, Susan," Eddie interjected. "I've already told Jim what a nut you are. Always more interested in a poem or story you're writing than in the captain of the football team."

"Thanks Eddie. You're true blue!"

Back at the house, Jim's mom and my mom were pouring over a scrapbook. Just like the one Mom has on Eddie, I figured.

I looked over their shoulders at the photos and clippings while they compared the attributes and shortcomings of their sons.

"Mom, what are you doing with that thing?" Jim scolded when he came into the kitchen.

"Oh shoosh," Mrs. Stacy told him. "Helen and I are just getting acquainted. You go on back outside with the men where you belong!"

"Yes Mommy," Jim mocked and retreated.

Mom and Mrs. Stacy put the book aside for dinner preparations. I picked up the scrapbook. By the time dinner was ready, I felt I had known Jim for a long time. Many of the photos, "the first fish," birthday parties, 4-H Achievement Day awards, and so on were duplicates of photos of Eddie and I.

Jim came home with Eddie for my high school graduation

and the next few months found me either visiting Eddie and Jim at Waynesville or them coming to our farm at Cobalt Village. At Jim's folks, I helped with riding out to check on the cattle and even digressed enough from my former self to help Mrs. Stacy can peaches.

Jim and I went for long walks in the woods behind Dad's as well as at his parents. I liked to be in the woods, liked the rich vegetating smell. Jim humored me as I would motion with a back-reaching hand for him to be still while I listened to the alternating sound of a woodpecker or the nervous chatter of a squirrel. Jim, of course, was always hunting or scouting for a hunt, but cross-purposes didn't seem to matter.

Once when we were fishing at a pond on his dad's property, Jim wandered off. The call of nature, I assumed and shrugged my shoulders. Sometime later a bouquet of wild flowers suspended from a fishing rod dangled in front of my eyes.

Come Fall, I entered Southeast Missouri State College at Cape Girardeau so we didn't get to spend as much time together. When we could arrange to, though, we still chose out-of-doors activities. Sometimes sledding, or iceskating, or just going for long walks over snow covered fields.

I was studying Ralph Waldo Emerson in English and was impassioned to identify myself and Jim with his Transcendental idealism. At the time, I thought Jim agreed

with my ideas.

For Memorial Day weekend, Eddie proposed a float trip on the Big Piney.

At the Stacy farm, we loaded Jim's canoe on with Eddie's, then followed him in our car to a campground downstream where we left it as a pick-up vehicle. Back upstream a few miles, we unloaded the canoes from Eddie's car. We divided the coolers and tent and duffle bags full of changes of clothes and the rods and reels and tackle boxes into the two canoes. We planned to paddle upstream three miles more to make camp near a place where the river forked and where Jim insisted bass would greedily gobble up fat artificial worms. He knew those were the only kind I would use.

Jim had brought Brutus along. He was the cutest darn puppy, a Weimaraner-Pointer cross with mammoth-sized paws out of proportion to the rest of his body. Jim's folks had given him to Jim for his birthday and were keeping him on the farm until his discharge.

Brutus looked austere and well-disciplined, but became all jello with a simple pat on the head. He loved fudgesicles. He hated water. He balanced his short legs on top of the duffel bags in the middle of Jim's canoe like he was Meriweather Lewis, but scouted for likely places to abandon ship. When the guys pulled the canoe up to a gravel bar to relieve themselves, Brutus disappeared into the

willows. He was too much of a coward to wander far so was found with little difficulty when it was time to push off. Jim came bent backwards from Brutus' weight in his arms, grinning and talking to Brutus as he would to a scared little boy. Brutus' eyes looked mournful.

"Poor old Brutus," I said as I ran a hand reassuringly along his back before Jim eased the canoe into the stream. I filled my beer can with cool river water and reached over to let the water pour out onto his hot fur.

We passed some cows drinking where the fence dipped down to their watering spot. We could see hoofmarks dried in the mud on the bank and big horseflies swarmed around the cows' backs. Large elm trees stood at the edge of the field and willow saplings and sumac filled in from them down to the river so that you really couldn't see the field too well. The cows were Jim's dad's and were grazing on leased land.

A month earlier Jim and I rescued some cows stranded on a gravel bar in a big rainstorm. I was wearing a pair of old levis cut off to make them into shorts. After I climbed on the back of a palomino mare, I ripped the sides up even higher so they wouldn't cut into my legs. The horse was wet and slippery and I didn't have a saddle so I wrapped my legs as tight as possible and rode into the swirling water. I urged a steer to safety by holding onto its horn while it fought the current along with my horse. One little heifer

almost was lost, but I noticed its fright in time and slipped into the water beside it, holding onto its ear to guide it as I swam next to it.

After it was all over, I smelled like wet cows and muddy river; but Jim, laying next to me in the hayloft where we took shelter from the storm, ran his fingers through my wet hair, lifting it away from my face.

"Jim," I protested, I'm all stinky."

He just smiled. Our body scents eventually mingled with that of the hay and the heady sweetness of spring smells pushed close, startled into being by the relentless rain. Our lovemaking was warm and satisfying like wrapping up in a big bath towel after a tingly shower. We curled up together on the rough saddle blanket spread on top of the hay and fell asleep listening to the steady beat of rain on the sheetmetal roof.

Eddie and Jim paddled hard upstream. It would have been nice to have a small motor mounted on the stern. It took two hours to reach the campsite. Once there, Brutus made a beeline for the willows. Making camp immediately became serious business. Eddie and Jim unloaded the canoes and carried the tent to a mostly packed dirt area about fifty yards away from the river and near a big cottonwood that would shade the tent by afternoon. The metal tent stakes struck an occasional rock and made a sharp clean

sound. I wandered off into the scrubby brush to scrounge up firewood.

Once everything was organized, I spread out a beach towel on the gravel bar and squeezed out suntan lotion in gloriously cool spirals against my sweaty body. Jim and Eddie grabbed rods and reels and a stringer each and started up to where the river forked into a deep eddy. They wore old tennis shoes because they would be wading the river. The water was cold yet this time of year, but Jim told me he liked it that way. It made his legs feel numb, like they were part of the river. The best fishing wouldn't be until later in the day, but Jim was always anxious to get off in the quiet. He likes to commune with nature just like I do, I thought with appreciation.

At 2:00 they were back for lunch and found me asleep. When I sat up, I could feel the sweat ooze down my belly from where it had pocketed itself in my navel.

Lunch was simple. A can of elberta peaches, tuna sandwiches already made up at home, and soda pop from the cooler. I was cleaning up when we heard a rumbling noise from far off.

"Listen to them sound off those big guns," Jim said.

"They aren't close enough to us to be dangerous, are they?" I asked.

"Yea. Rat-a-tat-tat," Eddie laughed playfully and pointed his imaginary submachine gun at me. I scowled.

"I've heard those guns all my life," Jim said, "but they always unnerve me. As a kid I used to sleep with my light on all night because of them. Now I have Susie to protect me!" He pulled me down to the ground on top of him.

"Come on, you guys." complained Eddie. "We all know they're only playacting. Let's quit taking advantage of feeble excuses for body grabbing."

We spent the rest of the afternoon fishing, but this time had taken the canoes. I had never fished before meeting Jim but now it took on almost religious significance. Jim taught me how to find those little deep places where the river made a bend. Deep dark places under rock outcroppings or old timbers where bass liked to hole up but where they could be tempted out with just the right bait. Bait such as long rubber worms that looked and wiggled like juicy nightcrawlers if you knew just how to jerk your rod. We would observe what was flitting on top of the waters and then go home to tie up the same kind of bug to use the next day. Jim taught me to wade up the middle of our Missouri streams, casting to the deep areas to the right and left banks. Fishing those streams, streams the color of good dark beer, were like baptismal rites for me. Being in the out-of-doors was uplifting, a refreshing change from reaching out to God through good works or singing hymns at revival meetings.

When we got back, we beached the canoes high up on the



gravel bar, securing them to a snag. I was sweaty and bored and dug eagerly into my duffel bag for a bar of soap and a towel.

The sun was just setting, leaving orange and gray swirls in the sky. Chirrupy crickets and bullfrogs with deep bass voices had begun their gravel bar cantata.

Eddie took Brutus for a walk downstream. Jim settled against a tree for a smoke and sat there like a fat happy Buddha watching me undress. I kicked off my tennis shoes directly at him but he ducked. Next a mock strip tease with my tee shirt and bathing suit, then a quick plunge into the shimmering water.

After Jim finished his cigarette, he brought a bar of soap into the stream. We lathered each other up and laughingly slipped in and out of each other's grasp like water nymphs.

When Eddie returned, he and Jim cleaned the fish. We had three good-sized smallmouth bass, a couple of crappie, and a bunch of sunperch. Jim's expertise fascinated me. He would slide his fillet knife deftly along the bellies of the fish, gutting out the entrails and letting them float away. Next he lopped off the heads and, holding fast to the tail fins, sliced along the bone to come up with nice clean fillets. He took the fillets and tacked them to a piece of cottonwood driftwood with the skin side next to the wood. I peeled potatoes and sliced onions and left them in a pan of

water to keep fresh until time to fry them.

Eddie hacked up a large dry log, placing its pieces atop a heap of smaller twigs encircled by a misshapen collection of rocks. The fire was soon roaring. Eddie stood next to it, arms dangling loosely, and stared as if entranced by each swipe the fire made at the darkness.

"Eddie, haven't you outgrown that silly passion yet?" I scoffed teasingly, remembering how he never grumbled about burning the trash at home, but always chose to do it after dark so he could watch the flames.

"Nope, nor my passion for dunking smart-mouthed sisters in cold rivers!" he rejoindered and advanced threateningly.

The roaring campfire brought back the light the setting sun had taken away and replaced the chill the river water left on our bodies with a tingling warmth.

Jim propped the fish near the fire and brushed the fillets frequently with bacon grease. He had read about how to do the fish this way in Cy Littlebee's Guide to Cooking Fish and Game. The smell of the bacon grease and the coffee perking up strong and aromatic in the blue enamel camp coffeepot triggered our hunger buttons. We all three sat there by the fire, cross-legged and clutching our middles as we bent toward the fire.

After supper we sipped coffee and dunked ginger cookies and talked. Jim smiled indulgently as I rambled on philosophically about the stars. I talked of the

possibility of other worlds and new planets and excursions to outer space. Eddie walked over to the cooler and brought out the Boone's Farm.

"Here, Jim," he offered, "Something to help you swallow all this crap."

Jim laughed and took a swig then handed it back.

Eddie leaned against a log by the fire and stared into the flames, obviously miles away in thought from where we were on the gravel bar. He poked at the fire, fixated by the charred logs disintegrating at his touch.

Jim and I, too, sat in silence and I had dozed off in his arms when I heard more rumbling noises in the distance.

Eddie's statement cut through the smoke of the dying campfire.

"We're going to be shooting real guns like those in Vietnam soon."

"Don't be so morbid, Ed!" I scolded. I didn't want to think about Vietnam and, besides, Jim's tour of duty would be up in another month.

"I'm surprised they're at it this late," Jim remarked.

"Maybe it's not soldiers," I joked. "Maybe it's God target practicing along the milky way."

"Someday you're going to be grownup enough to take religion seriously," Eddie told me. Actually he was just as prone to such lightheaded remarks, but somehow while that was alright for him, it wasn't for his little sister.

We gazed at the milky way quite visible in the clear May night and watched the shadowy silhouette of furry bats illumined against the moonlit water. Occasionally one would come close enough to create a slight but sinister breeze next to an ear.

Earlier we had blown up air mattresses to protect against the rocks embedded too deep to wedge out before putting down the tent. We threw sleeping bags on top of them now. Eddie was restless, but Jim and I went to sleep right away. Sometime later Eddie shook Jim's shoulder.

"Jim. Wake up. I hear something."

Jim squirmed upright in the sleeping bag next to me. "Come on, Ed, it's in the middle of night, for Pete's sake!" He scrunched back down inside and scooted his bag next to mine.

"I'm serious, Jim. There's a noise coming from down by the river. It sounds like someone is bothering our canoes. You go back to sleep if you want, but I'm going to go check it out."

Ed pulled on his sneakers. They were still wet and he let out a shallow moan as his warm foot eased inside their clammy coolness. He did not bother to lace them.

Ed lifted the flap and stepped out into the coolness of the May night. Through the opened flap I could see the moon shine on the brown water moving swiftly. I raised up to watch Eddie check out the canoes. I could make out only one

as Eddie hurried down to the water's edge. The water was running fast and dark and the stern of one canoe was rocking back and forth from the force.

"Hey, Jim!" Eddie yelled. "Your canoe is gone."

The three of us huddled together at the river. It had grown dark and ugly like the Mississippi and though much much narrower, was also much swifter. The water level had risen a good three feet higher on the gravel bar than it was when we beached the canoes. It must have rained upstream, so far up that we had been completely unaware of it. The river had swollen and had risen so much the canoe washed free. I started to make a crack about God being a canoe thief, but decided Ed wouldn't be in the mood for that kind of levity.

The guys slipped the remaining canoe into the swift moving water. They didn't need to paddle, just used the paddles to stay free of debris being washed alongside.

They found Jim's canoe two miles downstream snagged against a tree whose roots had collapsed from the bank long ago forming a natural breakwater. Jim's paddles were missing and so was the Mitchell reel I had given him for his birthday in March. They tried tying a rope onto the canoe and pulling it behind the other one upstream. The current was too strong. They walked both canoes back by tying the ropes around their waists and trudging against the current. In the dark and because of the force of the water, they

couldn't tell where to step. Their ankles were cut and bleeding from encounters with shifting sharp-edged rocks by the time they reached camp. I was waiting by the water, standing upright in my sleeping bag with it held up under my chin with one hand while with the other I shakily strobed the river with a flashlight.

The next morning we ate cinnamon rolls and downed scalding hot coffee while we discussed strategy. We didn't eat all the rolls and the ones we left on top of the cooler were found by Brutus and buried. He had his own strategy. We had decided to pull out since the muddied water would have ruined the fishing. I broke down the tent and rolled up the sleeping bags and let the air out of the mattresses while the guys went downstream to look for the rod and reel missing from Jim's canoe. They had figured right. It was tangled deep in the water in the limbs of the same tree that had blocked the canoe.

Eddie tied a rope around his waist and held onto it while Jim secured himself with the other end and dived over and over through the swirling water. There was a natural undertow there and they recovered five additional rods and reels lost earlier by other unlucky floaters.

After Jim's discharge in June, we married and moved into a small apartment just outside of St. Louis.

"Hey, Susie, come look," Jim called from the bathroom.

He was sitting on the john and brushing his teeth at the sink at the same time. When Eddie came to visit, he ribbed us about being able to sit across the living room from each other and still make love.

Jim took a job selling farm implements which meant he traveled all over the state. I enrolled in classes at Jefferson Junior College as much to fill in the empty days as with any set goal in mind.

As Eddie predicted, we did get involved in the Vietnam conflict and he volunteered to be sent over. Although he wrote to Jim and I about duty, God's edict for us to protect everyone's freedom, and brotherhood, I couldn't help but suspect part of his motivation was simply ego. He wanted to be a war hero. That would have been fine with me if he just hadn't roped Jim in as well.

New Year's Eve Jim made his big announcement. He was watching the news, most of which was about Vietnam.

"It isn't right," he said vehemently.

"Of course it isn't," I agreed. "War never is."

He stared back at me, his jaw set decisively and his hands squeezed together between his spread out knees.

"That's not what I mean."

"All right. What do you mean?"

"Ed and others like him are over in that hellhole while I sit here letting them fight my war for me."

"Your war!" I was astounded.

"That's right. Mine."

"We can't just sit back and let those Commies take over." His voice got louder and he stood up to pace the floor. "First they take over places like Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia. It'll be a slow process, but sooner or later they're in Cuba, Mexico. The United States," he finished dramatically.

We let in the New Year locked in an emotional argument about American values and obligations.

January and February proved to be miserable months. An ice storm hit with such force that Lambert Field closed down for two days and motorists were asked to stay off the highways except for absolute necessities. Jim conducted as much of his business by phone as he could, only traveling when he saw no way around it to assuage his customer. For the most part he holed up in our apartment and let the gloom of the weather penetrate his fine honed conscience. On Valentine's Day, we learned that Eddie was reported missing.

Neither of us slept much that night. I had been on the phone most of the evening with my parents and Jim just sat around staring at the walls. We went to bed about midnight and I dozed off. When I woke at 2:00, Jim was out in the living room. Realizing he wasn't going to milk anymore sleep out of the pillow reverses and legs pushed out and over the covers, he had gotten up.

"I've been thinking about Ed," he said glumly.



"Remember our float trip on the Big Piney last May?"

"Yes."

"How we recovered all those rods and reels?"

"Yes Jim."

"Ed...Ed...." Jim's voice cracked. "Ed isn't recovered," he finally blurted. "He's either dead or rotting in some damn prison in a Vietnam jungle and here I sit doing nothing." He raised both fists to shake them at some invisible demon on the ceiling and then, shoulders hunched forward, let the tears channel down his cheeks on their descent onto the carpet. I gathered him close to me and rocked his body back and forth.

"I know, Jim. I know." Our tear-streaked faces pushed gently one against the other until our grief subsided and I was aware of things again, like my skin rubbed raw by Jim's bristly whiskers against my wet cheeks. I was heartbroken about Eddie. We didn't see life quite the same way, but I cared very deeply for him. Ed, my very serious, very responsible older brother.

Jim and I argued at intervals for days, but he had already made up his mind. By the end of the month he had re-enlisted.

During the two years he spent in Vietnam, I finished at Jefferson and had enrolled at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. They were lonely years, years with weekends

alternated between my folks and Jim's parents' farm in Waynesville. During the week I attended classes. Sometimes I would go to the St. Louis Zoo, one of my favorite haunts as a child. I watched the chimps and fed the tame deer and goats in the petting zoo that had been added since my time.

With my parents, with Jim's folks, I was constantly reminded that Ed and Jim were in a war and needed all our support and prayers. Things eased up a little when Ed got his release and was sent back home. He was no real help to me, however, always lecturing me on the terrible sacrifice Jim was making. I wanted to scream at him IF IT WEREN'T FOR YOU, JIM WOULDN'T BE OVER THERE. HE'D BE HERE WITH ME!"

I was aware of the horror of the war. How could I not be between the bloody spectacles that flashed across my TV screen and the accounts that filled Jim's letters. He told me of seeing bullet riddled corpses of children, sometimes a wooden yoke laying on top of them, the water spilling out of the buckets they were carrying back to camp. He found the body of one skinny, almost bald old woman sprawled atop a crying infant being crushed by its would be savior. Jim rolled the body away with the butt of his rifle and gathered the baby inside his shirt and carried it until he could find a Red Cross person to turn it over to. He related what he saw as though he had lost the capability of reacting on a sensitive, caring level. He told of guard duty. Of a figure in dark trousers and shirt fooling around a copter.

The figure ran so he was forced to shoot. The body jerked, he said, like an injured rabbit, its moans frail and high pitched. Close examination showed it to be a girl of about twelve. She had been rigging explosives under the copter when he had startled her. I showed Ed this letter and asked him how Jim could just write me these things and not comment emotionally?

"I mean, well, he had just shot a child! How can he write about it in the same methodical way he would tell me the procedure for filleting a fish?"

"You see so much of that, Sis. After a time all the repetition of the awful things being done by people to people just numbs your senses. A soldier at war is there to do a job and he has to be a machine, a war machine. He's no longer a person."

I couldn't accept that. I read over again Jim's words about the child's body "jerking like an injured rabbit" and I remembered watching Mom clean the rabbits Ed and Dad would bring in. Her sink was stoppered to hold the chill water which the red nakedness of the rabbits' small sinewy bodies soon bloodied. Mom squeezed stray gray pellets from the fatty shoulders. The skin looked bruised, betrayed, grayish where she had attacked it.

That night I dreamed of bloodied bathtubs full of injured children. A doctor stood over the bathtub trying to squeeze the ugly pellets through their tissue thin skin. I

woke myself screaming.

When Jim returned, he was a stranger to me. I felt angry for the time the army robbed us of . . . for all the nights I had spent alone.

"Hell, Susan, it wasn't like I didn't want to be home!" Jim defended.

"You volunteered, Jim. You had already served your time. No one told you you had to go. You volunteered!" My voice trailed off in bitterness.

"Boy, this sure isn't anything like when my uncle came home from Guam."

Jim walked across the room to stare out the window.

"He brought me a toy airplane and told me that the rattle I could hear when I shook it was a dead Jap inside and I played with the airplane and pretended I was a hero just like my uncle."

"'Did you kill lots of Japs, Uncle Charlie?' I asked and do you know what he said, Susan? Do you? 'You bet I did, Son.' he said and his voice was proud and he looked me square in the eye when he said it."

"All my relatives gathered around," his controlled voice continued, "crushing near, wanting to hear what my uncle had to say. Not like now, that's for damn sure, where nobody wants you to mention where you've been. It

EMBARRASSES them, for God's sake!" Jim turned his back to me but I could feel his anger and confusion as he gripped the edge of the draperies to stave off his rage.

"Jim, I'm sorry. But the war wasn't real to me. You weren't real anymore. You were a piece of paper that came once a week in the mail. I needed you, Jim. Your hands to hold me and show me love. You wrote about being homesick and missing us and killing people when you didn't understand why they were your enemies and mosquitoes and heat and lousy food. It didn't sound like the Jim that used to go for quiet walks in the woods with me, and it didn't sound like the Jim that left here all hyped up to defend freedom. I just didn't know how to respond to you anymore!"

"REAL Susan! You want to know REAL. It's spending two years of your life in a rotten jungle and coming home to have your wife draw away from your kisses like you're a rapist. It's having some reporter interview you like you've been on trial for a heinous crime against society. That's real, Susan. That's goddamn real!"

The curtain Jim had held in his clenched fist jerked loose on one side and the rod clattered to the floor.

"Jim, I AM sorry. I just don't have any feelings for you anymore. I don't know you." I knew as I was saying them that they were the wrong words, but I didn't know how to lie. Not in words. Not in emotions. Jim stormed bitterly out of the house.

Eventually we patched together a semblance of the old relationship, but something had been left in Vietnam or traded in for a shoddy substitute. The special bond that made me almost worship Jim eluded us. Jim took back his job selling farm implements, but instead of trying to schedule more time at home, he seemed almost eager to take to the road.

"I won't be home this weekend," he would often call and announce on Thursday evening. "Why don't you spend the weekend at your folks."

One weekend Dad commented on how these working weekends always seemed to happen when Jim was at the resort area around the Lake of the Ozarks. My temper flared.

"What exactly are you insinuating!" I was indignant, but inside I had been having the same suspicions myself.

Out of the blue the next spring Jim quit his traveling job for a regular 40 hour a week position at Monsanto Chemical in St. Louis. We bought a house. Brutus was brought up from Jim's folks and Jim was content to spend weekends at home training him for hunting. I had received my teaching degree in the spring and was applying for teaching positions.

I planted flowers and even a small vegetable garden while Jim put Brutus through the training regimen on the front lawn.

Even as a puppy he showed an instinct to hunt, sniffing

out robins in the yard or even quail in the willows by the river, and taking a pointing stance when he found one.

Jim put Brutus on a long leash. He would sit Brutus at his left side then begin walking at a brisk pace.

"Brutus! Heel!" he would yell and tug sharply at the leash. If the dog didn't sit to his satisfaction, he placed a hand on its hindquarters, pushing down and at the same time yelling, "Heel!"

Brutus learned quickly and Jim soon varied the routine, starting off at a fast pace then, like a comical robot, slowing to an easy walk, then breaking into a boyish run. I laughed at the two of them. Turning right, then left, Jim would try to catch Brutus offguard, but the dog was always right behind, ready to heel on command. Finally he could go through the routine without the necessity of the leash.

That fall he took Brutus hunting. Sometimes I went along and watched as Brutus sniffed every square foot of ground just like a vacuum cleaner sucking up dirt. When he detected a bird, he stiffened, pointed his nose directly at a seemingly unoccupied bush, raised one front leg, immobilized his tail, and waited. Jim would either move in, disturbing the bushy area with his foot, or flush the game with the toss of a rock. Brutus was alert for where the quail dropped when Jim shot it and would then retrieve it, bringing it back to Jim in his soft jowls like it was a sacred offering.

Sometimes the two of us would strike out across the autumn fields seeing who could spot the first rabbit, or even a tiny mouse scurrying to take cover. The air was crisp and filled with the scent of fall. We walked in the woods and scuffed our feet through the fallen leaves and watched for the hunchbacked shell of a field turtle and then played a waiting game with it, watching for it to ease out its long gangly neck. The woods smelled of pine and sap oozing from the bark and dried leaves and it was like old times again.

Like Samson, Brutus' strength grew as he did and one day in early spring he met me at the back door, his doghouse trailing in the dirt at the end of his chain. This was when Jim attached the chain to a tree instead of the doghouse. We had previously tried one of those metal gadgets that you screw deep into the ground, but those were easy for Brutus to pull out. I suggested we build a kennel but Jim said no. "Too expensive."

Brutus did not like being tied up. He wanted to cavort with people and feel the freedom of a soft breeze against his short fur. He sometimes wanted to be loose so badly, he would snap his chain. Usually he would be waiting outside the kitchen door next morning for me to re-fasten him.

One night he slipped across the woods in the back of



our property to the blacktop highway. He was hit by a car and ended up at the pound. I finally located him after many frantic phone calls. We had a huge vet bill for a dislocated shoulder as well as a hefty rescue fee charged by the pound. I complained about the expense, saying we just couldn't afford such unexpected outlays. I probably was overbearing about the subject, but I was hoping Jim would give in and put up a kennel.

Despite our improved relationship, money issues continued to cloud things between us. I wanted to buy a color TV and Jim saw that as frivolous. On the other hand, Jim had just spent \$400 on a new canoe with money taken out of our meager retirement fund, in fact depleting it, and I saw that as frivolous. He seemed to have an insatiable appetite for acquiring sportsman toys with the defense being that he had missed out on all that in Vietnam. We were constantly at odds as to how to budget our income and the issue of the dog kennel became a focus for all of our differences. Jim's solution for containing Brutus, however, was less expensive. He bought a choke collar.

This fall was a complete reversal of the golden weekends of the year before. I was teaching and spent my weekends on lesson plans. Jim often worked Saturdays and when he didn't, he chose to go on hunting trips with one of his buddies from work.

Brutus would sit on his haunches by his doghouse,

forlornly hoping for some attention. I felt sorry for him but was even more preoccupied with what was happening between Jim and me.

One morning I went to the back of the yard to feed Brutus and found that he had tangled his chain around his doghouse, tightening his choke collar to a death vise. I couldn't even get at the catch to release the collar from the chain because the chain was wrapped around it. Since Jim wouldn't be home for hours, I called in our neighbor to help.

"You know, Susan, you really aren't supposed to use these things except for training," Mr. Jordan admonished me as his strong fingers freed Brutus.

When Jim came home that evening, I told him and again brought up the subject of the kennel.

"And with what money," he sneered. "I work hard just to pay the bills to keep us in food and clothes."

I ignored the omission of my financial contribution.

"Oh? And what about that new archery set. \$180.00, wasn't it? What's more important, you playing Davy Crockett or taking care of your dog?"

"That's not fair, Susan. It's not like Brutus is our child! You just can't adjust to having a man back in your life making decisions. I'm the one wearing a choke collar."

"Even an animal has a right to be treated fairly. If you don't want a hunting dog, then let's give him to someone

who does. Both Rusty and Mr. Evans up the street already have kennels and would be glad to have a dog like Brutus."

"I didn't say I didn't want him." Jim slammed out of the house without supper.

A couple of weeks later I let Brutus loose to play while I worked in the yard raking leaves. He romped like a puppy until the neighbor's dog, a sour-tempered, squatty beagle-mastiff mix, sneaked into the yard in his typical chip on the shoulder manner. Brutus was provoked into defending his turf almost before I knew the instigator was in the yard. I grabbed the water hose, turning it full blast on the quarreling dogs. Jim, for once at home and cutting firewood in the back, heard the commotion and came running, getting in well-aimed thumps with his heavy logging boots on the sides of the beagle. All three of them were soaked before I thought to turn away the spray of water.

"Now are you satisfied!" Jim shouted at me as he led the yelping Brutus unceremoniously to the rear to once again secure him with that collar. He stomped inside to shed his wet clothes.

I poked at the leaves with my rake. It seemed silly to be allowing a pet to break up a marriage. But I knew that wasn't it. Jim had changed again. He seldom hugged me. He balked at outings I tried to plan for the zoo or ice capades or even ball games. Jim played on the basketball team at work but his games were off-limits for me though I knew

other wives and family attended. What was I doing wrong? Did Jim need more love? More freedom? Was it Vietnam--or was it too much responsibility too young?

The rest of the weekend was a lonely, rainy one. Jim holed up in his workshop, moodily cleaning his guns and equipping his new arrows with tips made from four-pronged, razor-sharp, pieces. He perked up late Sunday when a friend called wanting him to come help install a stereo system. "I'll probably be late," he warned. "Joe said he'd treat me to a beer afterwards."

"Who is it, Jim? Who are you seeing? That wasn't a Joe on the phone. Josephine, maybe!"

"You're crazy," he spluttered and grabbed the car keys.

The next few days the October rain continued, further dampening our already depressed spirits. Brutus, too, reacted sullenly to the injustice of the rain and the collar and stayed inside his doghouse most of the time. A couple of times I brought him up to the kitchen to feed him, but wasn't in the mood myself to make the extra effort trudging back and forth in the rain and cleaning up muddy paw prints afterwards, so I took his food out to him. Jim always felt he left for work too early to be expected to take care of that chore.

On Friday morning I awoke to sunshine streaming into the room. Jim had a basketball game the night before and hadn't bothered to come into our bedroom at whatever hour he

had made it home, so I hadn't woke when he got up to go to work. I threw back the covers and wandered to the window, sliding my fingers between two slats of the blinds, and gazed into our wooded backyard.

"Damn!" With exasperation I saw that Brutus was trapped tight as a key on an opened sardine can with his chain wound several times around the large black oak and the choke collar squeezing into his neck with every additional nudge.

I cursed Jim the entire time it took me to grab robe and slippers and run down to Brutus. I spoke softly to Brutus as I tried to calm him enough to lead him counter clockwise around the tree. I reached my arm around his front shoulder, patting his leg and telling him everything was going to be alright. The quivers in Brutus' body began to subside somewhat and I was able to maneuver him in the right direction to release the pressure on his neck. With the collar loose, I could see the hideous imprint in his fur and even could see places where it had drawn blood. Tears came to my eyes as I hugged the big Marmaduke like dog.

Brutus had always been sort of my baby even though he technically was Jim's hunting animal. Jim had his tail and ears cropped as a puppy. I was spending spring break at Jim's folks so picked Brutus up at the vet's. They brought him out with his little ears bandaged and sticking straight up and his now short stub of a tail doing the same. During

the days of the healing process, we laughed at the comical sight of him going in circles to try to catch hold of the bandage on his tail. Just like any cute child, he received lots of cuddling. I held him in my lap in the car. Often to my consternation, but mostly to my amusement, Brutus continued to try to claim his prized seat on my lap on the passenger side of the car even after he had grown to a hulking, muscular adult, measuring 27 inches at his shoulders and weighing close to 80 pounds.

Brutus trusted me and now docilely followed me in reverse fashion around the tree. I unfastened the collar and led him back to the house and poured him some milk. He curled up in the corner of the kitchen and placed his head on his paws, his eyes following my every move.

Before leaving for school, I called Jim at work flinging accusations and expletives. He hung up.

When he called back five minutes later, his voice was cold as the icicles we use to break off the sheetmetal roof of our back porch. "Well," he said, "Are you through throwing your knives now so we can talk?"

"I think I have every right to be mad. That goddamn collar! It just isn't right, Jim."

"We've been through all that, Susan. We just don't see it the same way."

"Those things are meant for training a dog, Jim, not to be used like some medieval torture tool. Look, why don't we

just arrange to buy the kennel fencing through our Sear's charge. I know it'll cost us some interest payments, but at least we wouldn't have this kind of thing coming between us. It's pulling us apart, Jim. It's wearing out our marriage."

"So a kennel can fix what's wrong with our marriage, can it?" Jim's voice had gone a few degrees colder.

"If you are going to have a pet, you have to take the responsibility of its welfare."

"Brutus is not a PET," he informed me. "He is a hunting dog and you spoil him royally. Quit looking at life through tinted glasses, Susan."

This time I hung up. I spent the next several minutes letting a shower rinse away the ugly feelings oozing out of my pores. If Jim called back, I wasn't aware of it. After the shower, I made Brutus comfortable in the garage and then gulped down some coffee before leaving for school.

At noon I went by Central Hardware and bought a new collar for Brutus. This time a sturdy leather one. Sensing that Jim wouldn't make it home after work, I made plans to go directly from school to do some shopping at South County. When I returned around 7:30, there was no sign that Jim had been there.

Much later the antique clock on the mantle struck twelve times, cutting into the tomb like silence of the darkened room. I untangled my legs from the deep recliner and for the umpteenth time that evening crossed over to peer

out the front drape. My view of traffic was obstructed by a small dip in the road just beyond our driveway, but I could extend this view by using my ears and watching for the first glimmer of headlights at the crest of the hill. My half anxious, half annoyed scrutiny gave no satisfaction. I drifted into the kitchen for a glass of water. Setting the glass on the counter, I dug my fists into my robe pockets and walked resignedly to the bedroom. If Jim had been home, I would not have bothered with nightwear. He wasn't, so partly from an aversion to the cold bed and partly out of a feeling it was somehow indecent to crawl into bed naked by oneself, I donned an old flannel granny gown.

I tossed and turned for awhile and then got back up and poured myself a glass of wine and settled back into the recliner to watch a late night movie. I don't know exactly what time it was when Jim came in, but something like three glasses of wine past 2:00 AM.

"So now I've driven you to drink," Jim said sardonically.

"I think it's time we tried to talk this over. What's happening between us Jim?"

"Not now, Susan. I'm beat. I had a bad day at work and spent most of the evening downing beers with Rusty, trying to forget work and us and life in general. I'm supposed to meet Harvey down at Elvins 7:00 AM sharp in the morning and I'm going to bed."



"No! I want to talk NOW." My voice raised several octaves.

"Damn it, Susan, no!" Jim turned and walked to the bedroom, stripping down and pulling the blanket up around him while I stood beside the bed heaving with anger.

Eventually, feeling cold and ridiculous, I yanked a blanket out of the linen closet and sacked out on the couch.

Later Jim woke me with all of his thrashing about and animal-like attempts at screaming. I went in to him and held his sweating, frightened body to mine until he could regain his hold on reality.

He wrapped his quivering body into the bends of my own and gradually his raking breath on my neck settled into soft gentle gusts of warm air.

When I awoke, he was already gone to meet Harvey. These middle of the night nightmares had happened before, but Jim always claimed not to remember them. Attempts to get him to go for counseling were futile. All he really needed, he claimed, was for me to quit needling him so much.

After breakfast I drove to the nursery and bought some tulip bulbs. Easing them into the mound of black earth I had prepared was easier work than listening to an empty house.

Suddenly I felt an uneasiness, like somebody watching me. I craned my neck to see over my right shoulder. Brutus

was there, about 10 feet away, sitting very still but funny-like. He still had on the leather collar and part of his chain trailed from it. When I called to him, he just looked at me with sorrowful, hurt eyes. As I came close to him, I could tell one shoulder hung disjointed. He tried to move toward me, but winced and then his whole body shuddered.

I led him slowly to the garage where I made him as comfortable as possible on an old rug. Then I tried to call the vet. It was Saturday and there was no answer. I tried the emergency number and left a message for a return call. I was waiting for the call still in the early afternoon when I heard Jim's jeep in the driveway.

I told him about Brutus. He went to the garage to check just how seriously hurt the dog was. When he saw the leather collar, his eyes burned.

"What's this?"

"I bought it yesterday, Jim. I just couldn't stand using that inhumane choke collar anymore. You know, if you can't properly take care of a pet, correction HUNTING DOG, then you should get rid of it."

"You're right," he answered with a cold, seething stare, "And that's just what I'll do."

Jim spun around and stalked toward the garage door.

"Are you taking Brutus to the vet?" I asked in a quivering voice. No answer. I watched out the window as he helped the injured dog into the back of the jeep.

Jim sucked in his breath deeply, looked in my direction, then jumped into the jeep with stolid determination. His rifle was in its holder between the front seats where he always kept it if he planned to be in the woods. I watched the jeep go up the hill, the jerry can and shovel in their usual place on the rear gate that also held the spare tire. Brutus' head peered out, staring back at me.

When Jim returned two hours later, there was no Brutus. He took the muddy shovel from inside the jeep and rinsed it off with the yard hose.

I came unglued. Seizing his new bow, I snapped it across my knee. It was too strong to break cleanly, but part of the fiberglass bonding gave. Next were his arrows. One of the razor sharp blades sliced through my hand, but I didn't care. Jim was inside now but couldn't contain my rampage. Fishing rods, guns, all of his toys, were fair game for me. My rage was further vented as I pounded dent after dent into his prized Grumann canoe.

"You bitch!"

"No, Jim. Bitch is that thing you meet on Saturdays when you're supposed to be at work. I know the difference between a regular paycheck and one that has overtime even if you don't show me the check itself!"

"Why shouldn't I look for some real companionship. She at least doesn't act like I was castrated in Vietnam."

"You're the one that came back with all the hang-ups," I yelled back. "And you won't even try to work them out with me."

"Get off my back, Susan. If you want such an all-fired quality life why don't YOU do something!"

I jerked the suitcase out of the storage area under the steps. I hit my head doing it but didn't care. Socks, underwear, shirts, trousers--all were stuffed into it with equal malevolence.

I didn't watch as he left with it. As I remembered how my cut hand had dripped blood over everything of his that I had packed, I broke into hysterical laughter and then racking sobs that eventually subsided into deep slumber.

When I awoke, it was dark and the only sound was the mantle clock ticking away as though nothing had happened. I couldn't see the telltale signs of my rampage, but I knew they were there.

I flipped on lights and began to fill the trash cans in the garage with the broken bow and bent arrows.